

Will we resist the temptation?

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This paper was delivered as a response to a presentation by Jan Kronberg MLC, Chair of the Education and Training Committee, Parliament of Victoria that published a report of the *Inquiry into the Extent, Benefits and Potential of Music Education in Victorian Schools*. Her presentation and this response were part of a forum conducted by the School Music Advocacy Group at the University of Melbourne on 5 December 2013.

This Music Forum could not have been timelier, coming less than two days after the release of the results of the 2012 PISA tests in 65 countries. Reading the headlines, to which I will return, one would imagine that a crisis is upon us, and that an even stronger regime of unrelenting high stakes testing and a further narrowing of the curriculum are required, and the arts in general and music in particular will be sidelined, and so the title of my remarks applies: 'Will we resist the temptation?'

An outstanding report

First, I must congratulate Jan Kronberg and her colleagues on the Education and Training Committee for their outstanding report of the *Inquiry into the Extent, Benefits and Potential of Music Education in Victorian Schools* (Education and Training Committee, Parliament of Victoria, 2013). It is one of the most comprehensive of its kind I have seen. Its review of research was comprehensive and its canvassing of the evidence, including the very large number of submissions is as balanced as one could have ever hoped to read. Its recommendations are sweeping and realistic and I endorse them all. As I shall demonstrate, they are relatively modest compared to what is needed.

What value can I add at this point? It is not appropriate that I refer to the evidence I gave to the Inquiry because that is privileging my status over others who are more expert than me as far

as music education is concerned. I would like to bring a broader policy perspective to today's proceedings. After all, I have no background in music education. Even though I am an avid consumer of the arts, I have never played a musical instrument. I was a teacher of mathematics and science. However I did work with my colleague at Educational Transformations Dr Tanya Vaughan, now at the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL), to conduct the landmark research that led to our book *Transforming Education through the Arts* (Caldwell & Vaughan, 2012). Tanya is one of Australia's finest impact researchers. I will refer to some of our research findings a little later.

Troubling headlines

There have been some troubling headlines about education this week and I refer of course to the results of the 2012 PISA tests. The most dramatic were those in *The Australian* yesterday (December 4) (Ferrari, 2013, p. 1):

Students slump in world rankings: billions fail to stop slide in schools

Now it is true that we have dropped in the rankings. Other nations have overtaken us. However, surprisingly, we are one of a relatively small number of nations which are, to use the jargon, 'High Quality – High Equity'. That we are 'High Equity' is surprising

but that is because we are one of 65 nations that took the tests. We are conscious of the significant inequities between and within our schools and we know that we must do much better.

Reign of Error

What we must do is resist the temptation to spend even more billions on what we know has not worked! To demonstrate this in the context of music education I would like to call on the assistance of an eminent international scholar.

Diane Ravitch is Research Professor of Education at New York University and a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution. From 1991 to 1993 she was Assistant Secretary for Education and Counsellor to Secretary of Education Lamar Alexander in the administration of President George H. W. Bush. President Clinton appointed her to the National Assessment Governing Board, which oversaw federal testing. After previously supporting testing and extensive choice, including charter schools and the engagement of the philanthropic sector, she reversed her position on each. Her strongest criticism was levelled at the testing movement and, among other things, the way it narrowed the curriculum, including the arts.

The title of Chapter 2 in her 2010 book *The Death and Life of the American School System* (Ravitch, 2010) was 'Hijacked! How the standards movement turned into the testing movement'. She elaborated:

How did testing and accountability become the main levers of school reform? How did our elected officials become convinced that measurement and data would fix the schools? Somehow our nation got off the track in its efforts to improve education. What once was the standards' movement was replaced by the accountability movement. (Ravitch, 2010, p. 16)

At the heart of the problem, according to Ravitch, is the relationship between testing and the purposes of education:

Not everything that matters can be quantified. What is tested may ultimately be less important than what is untested, such as a student's ability to seek alternative explanations, to raise questions, to pursue knowledge on his own, and to think differently. If we do not treasure our individualists, we will lose the spirit of innovation, inquiry, imagination, and dissent that has contributed powerfully to the success of our society in many different fields of endeavour. (Ravitch, 2010, p. 226)

Significantly, Ravitch drew attention to the balanced curriculum in countries that should be providing the benchmark for Australia and the United States.

Other nations that outrank us on international assessments of mathematics and science do not concentrate obsessively on those subjects in their classrooms. Nations such as Japan and Finland have developed excellent curricula that spell out what students are supposed to learn in a wide variety of subjects. Their schools teach the major fields of study, including the arts and foreign languages, because they believe that this is the right education for their students, not because they will be tested. They do the right thing without rewards and sanctions. Their students excel in the tested subjects because they are well-educated in many subjects that teach them to use language well and to wrestle with important ideas. (Ravitch, 2010, p. 231)

In the arts, we should agree that all children deserve the opportunity to learn to play a musical instrument, to sing, to engage in dramatic events, dance, paint, sculpt, and study the great works of artistic endeavour from other times and places. Through the arts, children learn discipline, focus, passion, and the sheer joy of creativity. We should make sure that these opportunities and the resources to support them are available to every student in every school. (Ravitch, 2010, p. 235)

However, it is in her most recent book entitled *Reign of Error* (Ravitch, 2013) that Ravitch makes her most powerful argument and most devastatingly relevant critique. She demolishes strategies along the lines of privatising public education, obsession with national testing programs, merit pay, laptop fads, charter schools, online learning and handing control to parents (each of which has merit in some circumstances). She highlights the benefits of early learning, wraparound services and strengthening the profession. All of this makes good reading, but what brought me to the edge of my seat was her chapter entitled 'The Essentials of a Good Education'. It might be re-issued under the title 'The Essentials of a Good Policy in Education'. I will cite a few excerpts as they relate to 'The Extent, Benefits' and Potential of Music Education in Victorian Schools' and 'The Headlines of the Week'.

Every school should have a full, balanced, and rich curriculum, including the arts, science, history, literature, civics, geography, foreign languages, mathematics, and physical education. (Ravitch, 2013, p. 234)

Our policy makers today think that what matters most is getting high test scores in reading and mathematics. They don't show any regrets if a school spends inordinate amounts of time and money on test preparation materials. (Ravitch, 2013, p. 234)

We cannot provide equal educational opportunity if some children get access to a full and balanced curriculum while others get a heavy dose of basic skills. This is one instance where no research is needed. The fact of inequality is undeniable, self-evident, and unjustifiable. This inequality of opportunity may damage the hearts and minds of the children who are shortchanged in ways that may never be undone. (Ravitch, 2013, p. 237)

All are enriched and enhanced by the arts. The arts are essential for everyone. Life is enhanced by the arts. No student should be denied the opportunity to participate in the arts or to learn about the arts here and in other cultures. All students should have the chance to sing, dance,

draw, and paint in school. They should have the resources for video production and for chorus, band, orchestra and dramatics. The arts are a source of joy, a means of self-expression and group expression. To master a musical instrument or to participate in choral music requires self-discipline and practice; no one can do it for you. Every school should have the resources to enable students to express their individuality and to take pleasure in joyful communal activity. (Ravitch, 2013, p. 240)

Sadly, the growing obsession with data has shoved aside these important goals. (Ravitch, 2013, p. 241)

Could music education help lead Australia's climb up the international league tables?

I would like to seriously advance the proposition that placing specialist arts teachers including specialist music teachers in all Australia's schools would lead Australia's climb up the international league tables much faster than any of the current strategies and at far less cost than anything envisaged at this time. I have not seen arts or music mentioned in one media comment in recent days. Let me give you a glimpse of the evidence, which is drawn from *Transforming Education through the Arts* (Caldwell & Vaughan, 2012).

Our research team examined the performance of students in 10 schools in highly disadvantaged settings in Western Sydney. Three schools offered the longer-term program of The Song Room (TSR) over 12 to 18 months, and three schools offered an initial short-term program of 6 months. In each instance the program was conducted for Grades 5 and 6 students for one hour on a single day once per week. A control group of four schools did not offer The Song Room program. The three groups of schools were a matched set as far as socio-educational advantage is concerned. The study was a rare example of quasi-experimental design in educational research.

Important differences were found in favour of students that undertook the TSR program. The findings have national and international significance. First, related research in other countries was confirmed. Participation in TSR was associated with a gain of approximately one year in Year 5 NAPLAN scores in reading and approximately half a year in science and technology when compared to outcomes for students in matching schools.

Now here's an interesting possibility. I did not have time to work out the implications based on 2012 PISA but here is what we may learn from 2009 PISA, as suggested in Table 1 which indicates how many months our Australian 15-year-olds are behind counterparts in Hong Kong, Shanghai and Singapore. Assuming we can place arts specialists in schools where they can make a difference, as in our studies in Western Sydney, they can help schools go a long way in closing the gap in a relatively short time at a fraction of the cost of strategies that have failed to make much of a difference.

Table 1: The number of months that students in Australia are behind 15-year-old counterparts in Hong Kong, Shanghai and Singapore in Reading, Mathematics and Science (adapted from OECD, 2011).

Jurisdiction	Reading	Mathematics	Science
China: Hong Kong	6	12	7
China: Shanghai	13	25	15
Singapore	3	14	5

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Conclusion

If we are serious about addressing our deficits as far as equity is concerned then we need to re-balance the curriculum along the lines that Dianne Ravitch proposed and abandon high-cost approaches that simply haven't worked. That is how we will fund the relatively modest costs of placing specialist arts teachers in every school in the state. Such a strategy is not, of course, the only one. We must place a high priority on enhancing the quality of initial teacher education and building the capacity of the profession in areas that are likely to make a difference, but that's another story. As far as we are concerned, for music education, there are powerful lessons for the Government of Victoria that is now armed with a report that contains the evidence.

References

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