

# Music Education in Schools – what is taught? A comparison of curriculum in Sweden and Australia

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## Abstract

Music has been a subject offered in schools for some time across the globe. Students will often study music, alongside other arts subjects or as a stand-alone music course, during the primary school years and at selected times during secondary school. Despite music being an important subject within schooling, other subjects such as English, maths and science are often privileged over the arts. Most countries have their own music curriculum that describes the intended learning within music, however few studies have explored the similarities and differences of music curriculum across countries. In this study, we analyse the music curriculum of Australia and Sweden. We first present a brief history of music education in both countries and then analyse the music curriculum to reveal comparative aspects. Using content analysis, we were able to identify main themes in the curriculum content including making and responding to music, Indigenous musics, and health and safety. Comparative studies about curriculum are important for improved curriculum development as well as understanding the different knowledge and skills students are expected to learn in music from a global perspective.

**Keywords:** music education, music curriculum, Australia, Sweden, comparative study

## Introduction

Music is often a compulsory subject area in schools for many children around the world (Abril & Gault, 2016; Hoffer, 2017). The content of what children learn in music education in different countries however, is under-researched. This article helps to fill this void by exploring music education curriculum in Sweden and Australia. Both countries share many characteristics, including democratic foundations in schooling, good quality of life and high levels of education quality. Both countries also have developed music education curricula that have been implemented across the entire country. The intention of the paper is to explore the aims stated in each country's music curriculum

documents and to discuss the similarities and differences that arise.

While curriculum can have many different meanings (Ewing, 2012; Marsh & Willis, 2003), in the context of this paper it is described as the literal worded document found in Swedish and Australian schooling. The official document is published by the curriculum body/government agency in each country and implemented by schools.

The paper begins with a short literature review of music education in Sweden and Australia before sharing the focus of the study and method. The findings and discussion follow, before the paper concludes with key considerations about the curriculum comparison.

## Music education and curriculum in Australia: A review of the literature

### Music education: A brief history

Australia has a rich history of music education. Of course, most importantly music teaching and learning is embedded throughout Australia's First People's communities and culture. Music and dance, often referred to as *inma*, carries forward deeply significant stories through ritual associated with the land. Mowaljarlai (2015) believed that "song was the first idea, the principle of sharing which underlies our system". Aside from rich traditions associated with Australia's First Peoples, a long-standing heritage within Australia's schooling system has existed since Federation.

Music education and music as an artform was viewed as a cultural, artistic and social accomplishment. It was however, unsurprisingly, conducted as a service to the elite or those could afford it. Learning an instrument in the early 1900s was an expensive past-time and one was encouraged to participate in public music examinations. With this practice came the establishment of university music programs often in conservatoriums and also secondary schools for music specialisation (Stevens, 2016).

In schools, programs essentially followed British pedagogies even though at the time classrooms were already diverse with many immigrants from Europe, Asia and the Oceania region settling in Australia. Sol-fa was also gaining popularity as was choral training. According to Stevens (2016) "music was introduced to schools not so much for its intrinsic values but as a form of pedagogy for instilling (through the words of school songs) moral, patriotic and religious values in children" (p. 1). Consequently, this approach filtered through to missionary schools established for Indigenous children who were often stolen from their families and communities.

Popular approaches to music, particularly

in primary school settings were the use of the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC) songbooks from the 1930s. Since this time the States and Territories have been responsible for their own approaches to music education in schools, which we will not explore in this paper. It is worth noting however, that many schools adopted strong instrumental/band programs with individual students able to undertake private studio lessons outside of the school context.

In 2005, a National Review of Music Education was conducted across Australia. The purpose was to discuss the issues concerning the delivery of one of the subjects of the arts: music (Hartwig, Wise & Faik-Simet, 2017). The report identified the following priorities: improving the equity of access, participation and engagement in school music for all students; improving teacher education; improving curriculum support services; support productive partnerships and networking with music organisations, musicians, the music industry and the Australian community. Unfortunately, due to the then Federal Minister of Education changing, the project fell by the wayside (DEST, 2005).

### Music curriculum in Australia

In Australia, a national curriculum for the Arts (Foundation to Year 10) was completed for the first time in 2014 by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority. This curriculum comprises five subjects: Dance, Drama, Media Arts, Music and Visual Arts. In the *Australian Curriculum*, the Arts is a learning area that draws together related but distinct art forms. While these art forms have close relationships, and are often used in interrelated ways, each involves different approaches to arts practices and critical and creative thinking that reflect distinct bodies of knowledge, understanding and skills.

The curriculum examines past, current and emerging arts practices in each art form across a range of cultures and places. Each subject focuses on its own practices, terminology and unique ways of looking at the world including the music subject.

In July 2015, arts education in Australia moved forward with the announcement that the Arts were now part of the nationally mandated curriculum known as the *Australian Curriculum: The Arts* (2015). Even though the curriculum document has been written by the Federal body, the responsibility for the implementation of the Australian Curriculum has been handed to each state and territory

The *Australian Curriculum: The Arts* – music subject aims to develop students:

- the confidence to be creative, innovative, thoughtful, skilful and informed musicians
- skills to compose, perform, improvise, respond and listen with intent and purpose
- aesthetic knowledge and respect for music and music practices across global communities, cultures and musical traditions
- an understanding of music as an aural art form as they acquire skills to become independent music learners. (ACARA, 2014).

The scope and sequence chart for each of the artforms in the curriculum lists the bands as Foundation to Year 2; Years 3 and 4; Years 7 and 8; Years 9 and 10. Each band is explored through the descriptors of exploring ideas and improvising with ways to represent ideas; developing understanding of practices; sharing artworks through performance, presentation or display and responding to and interpreting artworks. The five subjects of the arts curriculum are compulsory for Foundation to Year 6 students whereas access to at least one or two subjects is required from years 7 to 10.

The music subject explores a range of topics including the elements of music (pitch, dynamics, rhythm, harmony, form and timbre and texture; listening and making such as composing and improvising; movement and beat; and performance. A focus on knowledge and skills in music is also explored, enabling students to be actively engaged in learning music related topics and techniques.

## Music education and curriculum in Sweden

### Music education in Sweden

In Sweden, municipalities are responsible for the implementation of music education. This means that funding can be allocated in different ways. In some years, students may have access to music and other years they may not have access to music. Over the compulsory nine years of schooling (grade one to grade nine), students must have at least 230 hours of music instruction (out of a total 6, 665 hours of instruction).

Students aged from 11 to 14 years (grades seven to nine in Australia and grades five to grade eight), can choose to join classes with a special emphasis on music. During this time they can also choose to have lessons in singing and playing instruments, ensemble playing and music theory. Some schools may also have extended music programs with entrance exams for music. Most municipalities will have well-developed music and arts schools as children enter lower and upper secondary schools.

### Music curriculum in Sweden

In Sweden there is a *Curriculum for the compulsory school, preschool school and the leisure-time centre 2011* (Skolverket, 2011). According to the curriculum, “the wording of the knowledge requirements for subjects in the compulsory school is based on the Provision on the Compulsory School System announced in the Code of Statutes (SKOLF5) of the National Agency for Education” (2011, p. x). The first part of the curriculum provides information about the fundamental values and tasks of the school. The second part of the curriculum looks at the overall goals and guidelines, with a specific focus on norms and values, knowledge, responsibility and influence of pupils, school and home, transition and cooperation, the school and the surrounding world, assessment and grades and the responsibility of the head teacher. The third part of the curriculum is called the syllabus and focuses

on the specific subjects that students should learn. These are art, English, home and consumer studies, physical education and health, mathematics, modern languages, mother tongue tuition, music, biology, physics, chemistry, geography, history, religion, civics, crafts, Swedish, Swedish as a second language, sign language for the hearing and technology.

Within the curriculum, music is described as: Music exists in all cultures and affects people, both physically, mentally and emotionally. Music as an aesthetic form of expression is used in a wide variety of contexts, has different functions and has different meanings for each and every one of us. It is also an important part of what people share socially and can influence the development of the individual's identity. In our time, music from different cultures and epochs is associated with other forms of art in new expressions. Knowledge of and in music increases the opportunities to participate in the cultural life of society. (Skolverket, 2011, p. 95)

The curriculum consists of core content areas in combined years. These are years 1-3, years 4-6 and years 7-9. The three main topics are: (1) playing and creating music; (2) tools of music; and (3) context and functions of music. The teacher is expected to implement learning experiences that cater for all of the core content areas.

## Focus of the study

This study focuses on the curriculum for year one to year nine/ten in Sweden and Australia. Both countries have been chosen for the comparison as they have requirements for music education from year one to year nine/ten. In Sweden years one to nine are the compulsory years of schooling. In Australia year one to year ten are the compulsory years of schooling. Both countries provide access to free schooling, have certification or registration of degree qualified teachers and have regular reviews about the quality within schools.

The specific focus of the study aims to explore similarities and differences between the two curriculums. The study question is therefore: What are the similarities and differences in the Swedish and Australian curriculum for music education?

## Method

Data was collected from the national curriculum in Australia and the national curriculum in Sweden. In Australia, music is a subject within the Arts curriculum whilst in Sweden music is a specific subject area. The data collected around music was then subjected to a content analysis. Content analysis is described as "a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from text (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use" (Krippendorff, 2004, p. 18). In this case we were exploring and making valid inferences from the two curriculum documents.

The analysis was completed individually by each researcher, before the individual results were discussed and compared. Data was classified under two descriptive headings- similarities and differences. The initial content areas for similarities and differences were discussed in detail to ensure classification. The main findings are discussed below.

## Findings and discussion

Table 1 presents the different curriculum content between Australia and Sweden. In Sweden compulsory schooling starts at 7 years of age (year 1), while in Australia children start at foundation year (aged 5). Initially both countries are similar with their content for early years learners, however on further investigation differences do emerge. The Swedish curriculum has more details about the actual requirements within each of the key music terms (e.g. imitation and improvisation with movement, rhythm and tones), while the Australian music curriculum takes a more general approach with statements such as "learn to move and perform with beat and tempo" (ACARA, 2012).

The Swedish and Australian curriculum both acknowledge the importance of Indigenous music and knowledge as part of musical learning. In the Australian music curriculum it is embedded across all of the year levels as part of a general underpinning. In the Swedish curriculum Sami music (local Indigenous population) is learnt during years four to six.

Both countries also focus on the health and safety with the voice and posture. In Australia, this is introduced in year seven, while in the Swedish curriculum it is introduced during the year four to year six stage of learning. Children however would be of the same age in both countries when learning about health and safety in music.

Both countries introduce the use of digital tools around the same time period. Both countries introduce the use of digital tools for the creation of different sounds, rhythms and beats. The digital tools are used for the creation of music.

The concepts of making, playing and responding to music in different ways is also common in both curriculum. What is made and responded to however varies depending on the different grades in the countries. In Sweden voice and instruments are introduced from the beginning. In Australia music education appears to begin with a predominance of the voice.

Learning about the history of music and composers also occurs at the same age range which is the final years of compulsory schooling in Sweden (grades 7-9) and in Australia's compulsory years (grades 7 and 8). This is the only time composers are mentioned in either curriculum. The focus may be because of child development, which allows children to explore decisions the composer may have made.

In general, the curriculum in both countries has the same content for music at similar times of the schooling time period. It is unclear if both the Swedish and Australian curriculum have been based on music child development sequences, however both curriculum do appear representative of certain child development stages with a stage approach.

In both countries, it is recommended that a wide variety of music and music styles are introduced at each level to the children. In previous music curriculum documents across Australian States, there has been a detailed list of particular rhythmic and melodic elements listed for study in each year level (Queensland Studies Authority, 2002).

In the new *Australian Curriculum* documents now in place this detail is not included. The Swedish documents also do not list specific music elements to be studied. The choice of methodology is left to the teacher's discretion in both countries. The curriculum documents are only centred on content and not methodology.

## Conclusion

When comparing across the Swedish and Australian curriculum, we begin to see differences and similarities in requirements for the different years of schooling. One important consideration is that the age of children in both countries in each of the years is different. Compulsory schooling begins at age seven in Sweden with year one. In Australia, compulsory schooling begins at the foundation year when children are aged five. While there is a difference in age however, children appear to study similar musical concepts, knowledge and engage in similar music making activities at similar points in their schooling. The findings suggest that the Australian and Swedish curriculum are very similar in their content for young children's music education and provide broad experiences for musical development. This is an important finding considering each country has a different form of schooling, requirements and funding for music education. At a macro level, each country also has cultural differences that influence educational policy and schooling curriculum in different ways. Nevertheless, in both countries the curriculum provides a very similar level of music education for children.

This study is limited in that it only explored the descriptive content of the curriculum in Sweden and Australia. It did not explore the actual implementation of the different curriculum within each of the different countries. Future studies are needed to see if music teaching practice varies across the countries and also document if children in different countries learn music in different ways. Further studies into different music curricula around the world is also important to advance

understanding about what children actually learn about music in schools. Questions about content are important as well as the age that children encounter different musical content and practice are important.

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**Table 1: Curriculum content between Australia and Sweden.**

Australia	Sweden
<p><b>Foundation – Year 2</b></p> <p><i>Making and responding to music</i></p> <p>Students:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• become aware of rhythm, pitch, dynamics and expression, form and structure, timbre and texture</li> <li>• explore sounds as they learn to listen to and make music</li> <li>• learn to discriminate between sounds and silence, and loud and soft sounds</li> <li>• learn to move and perform with beat and tempo</li> <li>• learn to listen as performers and as audience.</li> <li>• sing and play instruments to improvise, practise a repertoire of chants, songs and rhymes, including songs used by cultural groups in the community (ACAMUM081)</li> <li>• create compositions and perform music to communicate ideas to an audience (ACAMUM082)</li> </ul>	<p><b>In years 1–3</b></p> <p><i>Playing and creating music</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Singing and playing in various forms: choral singing, canon and antiphon, and ensemble playing.</li> <li>• Imitation and improvisation with movement, rhythm and tones.</li> <li>• Simple forms of creating music, such as taking text or pictures as a starting point.</li> <li>• Interpretation of songs and narratives with sound, rhythm and movement.</li> </ul> <p><i>Tools of music</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Voice as an instrument with variation in rhythm, tone and dynamics.</li> <li>• Percussion, string and keyboard instruments with variations in rhythm, tone and dynamics.</li> <li>• Rhythm, tone, dynamics and pitch as building blocks for playing and composing music.</li> <li>• Musical symbols, pictures and characters.</li> </ul> <p><i>Context and functions of music</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Associations, thoughts, feelings and images that arise when listening to music.</li> <li>• Different instruments from groups of wind, string, keyboard and percussion instruments. Sound and appearance of instruments.</li> <li>• Music that connects to the pupil's everyday and formal contexts, including the national anthem and some of the most common psalms, as well as insights into Swedish and Nordic traditions in children's songs.</li> </ul>

**Table 1: Curriculum content between Australia and Sweden (continued)**

Australia	Sweden
<p><b>Years 3 and 4</b>  <i>Making and responding to music</i>                      Students:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• extend their understanding of the elements of music as they develop their aural skills</li> <li>• match pitch and show the direction of a tune with gesture or drawings</li> <li>• recognise difference between notes moving by step and by leap</li> <li>• recognise and discriminate between rhythm and beat</li> <li>• explore meaning and interpretation, forms, and elements including rhythm, pitch, dynamics and expression, form and structure, timbre and texture as they make and respond to music</li> <li>• learn to listen as performers and as audience, extending their awareness of themselves and others as performers and as audience.</li> <li>• practise singing, playing instruments and improvising music, using elements of music including rhythm, pitch, dynamics and form in a range of pieces, including in music from the local community (ACAMUM085)</li> </ul> <p><b>Years 5 and 6</b>  <i>Making and responding to music</i>                      Students:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• further their understanding of rhythm, pitch, dynamics and expression, form and structure, timbre and texture in music</li> <li>• extend their understanding and use of aural skills as they sing and play independent parts against contrasting parts and recognise instrumental, vocal and digitally generated sounds</li> <li>• explore and use rhythm, pitch, dynamics and expression, form and structure, timbre and texture in music they perform and compose</li> <li>• explore meaning and interpretation, forms and elements of music as they make and respond to music.</li> <li>• explore dynamics and expression, using aural skills to identify and perform rhythm and pitch patterns (ACAMUM088)</li> </ul>	<p><b>In years 4–6</b>  <i>Playing and creating music</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Songs, melodies and accompaniment in ensemble form in different genres.</li> <li>• Playing musical patterns by ear, such as chord progressions, period and composition models.</li> <li>• Imitation and improvisation with voice and instrument, rhythm and tones.</li> <li>• Creating music based on musical patterns and forms, such as chord progressions and bass.</li> <li>• Musical performance.</li> </ul> <p><i>Tools of music</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Care of voice and hearing in musical activities, such as through warm-up exercises.</li> <li>• Healthy sound levels and different types of hearing protection.</li> <li>• Voice as an instrument for different vocal expressions, such as song, Sami yoiking and rap.</li> <li>• Chord and melody instruments, bass and percussion for melody and rhythm games, or for accompaniment.</li> <li>• Rhythm, tone and dynamics, pitch, tempo, periods, time signatures, verses and choruses as building blocks for composing music in different genres.</li> <li>• Musical symbols, graphic notation, notes and chord names.</li> <li>• Digital tools for audio and music creation.</li> </ul> <p><i>Context and functions of music</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Impact of music’s physical, conceptual and emotional characteristics on people in different contexts. How music is used to influence and for recreation in various ritual contexts.</li> <li>• Words and terms needed to be able to read, write and talk about making music, and about impressions and experiences of music.</li> <li>• Music together with pictures, text and dance. How different aesthetic expressions can interact.</li> <li>• Classification of string, wind, brass, keyboard and percussion instruments.</li> <li>• Classical music, folk music and popular music from different cultures and their musical characteristics.</li> </ul>



Table 1: Curriculum content between Australia and Sweden (continued)

Australia	Sweden
<p><b>Years 7-8</b></p> <p><i>Making and responding to music</i></p> <p>Students:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• build on their aural skills by identifying and manipulating rhythm, pitch, dynamics and expression, form and structure, timbre and texture in their listening, composing and performing</li> <li>• aurally identify layers within a texture</li> <li>• sing and play independent parts against contrasting parts</li> <li>• recognise rhythmic, melodic and harmonic patterns and beat groupings</li> <li>• understand their role within an ensemble and control tone and volume</li> <li>• perform with expression and technical control</li> <li>• identify a variety of audiences for which music is made</li> <li>• draw on music from a range of cultures, times and locations as they experience music</li> <li>• explore the music and influences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and those of the Asia region</li> <li>• learn that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have converted oral records to other technologies</li> <li>• learn that over time there has been further development of techniques used in traditional and contemporary styles of music as they explore form in music</li> <li>• explore meaning and interpretation, forms, and elements including rhythm, pitch, dynamics and expression, form and structure, timbre and texture as they make and respond to music</li> <li>• consider social, cultural and historical contexts of music</li> <li>• evaluate the expressive techniques used in music they listen to and experience in performance</li> <li>• maintain safety, correct posture and technique in using instruments and technologies</li> <li>• build on their understanding from previous bands of the roles of artists and audiences as they engage with more diverse music.</li> </ul>	<p><b>In years 7–9</b></p> <p><i>Playing and creating music</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Songs, melodies and accompaniment in an ensemble form with musical expression from typical genres.</li> <li>• Playing musical patterns by ear in different genres.</li> <li>• Rhythmic and melody improvisation to drum accompaniment, chord progressions or melody loops with voice and instruments.</li> <li>• Creating music in different genres, such as ballads, sound compositions and songs.</li> <li>• Musical representation where different forms of expression are combined.</li> </ul> <p><i>Tools of music</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Care of voice and hearing, and how listening to music and playing music can contribute to hearing impairment, and how this can be prevented.</li> <li>• How the voice can be varied in polyphony, vocal expressions in different genres.</li> <li>• Chord and melody instruments, bass and percussion for games in different tone and time signatures.</li> <li>• Rhythm, tone and dynamics, pitch, tempo, periods, time signatures, verse, chorus and chords as building blocks to make and compose music in different genres and with different instrumentation.</li> <li>• Musical symbols and notation systems, notes, tablatures, chord descriptions and graphic notation.</li> <li>• Digital tools for music creation, recording and processing.</li> </ul> <p><i>Context and functions of music</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sound and music's physical, conceptual and emotional impact on people. The functions of music to signify identity and group affiliation in different cultures, with a focus on ethnicity and gender.</li> <li>• How music is used in different media, such as in films and computer games.</li> <li>• Instruments and their functions in different genres and contexts, such as in a symphony orchestra or rock band.</li> <li>• Art music, folk and popular music from different epochs. The emergence of different genres and important composers, songwriters and musical works.</li> </ul>

**Table 1: Curriculum content between Australia and Sweden (continued)**

<b>Australia</b>
<p><b>Years 9-10</b></p> <p><i>Making and responding to music</i></p> <p>Students:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• continue to develop their aural skills as they build on their understanding and use of the elements of music</li> <li>• extend their understanding and use of more complex rhythms and diversity of pitch and incorporate dynamics and expression in different forms</li> <li>• extend their use of and identification of timbre to discriminate between different instruments and different voice types</li> <li>• build on their understanding of their role within an ensemble as they control tone and volume in a range of styles using instrumental and vocal techniques</li> <li>• extend technical and expressive skills in performance from the previous band</li> <li>• draw on music from a range of cultures, times and locations as they experience music</li> <li>• explore the music and influences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and those of the Asia region</li> <li>• learn that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have converted oral records to other technologies</li> <li>• learn that over time there has been further development of different traditional and contemporary styles as they explore music forms</li> <li>• reflect on the development of traditional and contemporary styles of music and how musicians can be identified through the style of their music</li> <li>• explore meaning and interpretation, forms and elements, and social, cultural and historical contexts of music as they make and respond to music</li> <li>• evaluate performers' success in expressing the composers' intentions and expressive skills in music they listen to and perform</li> <li>• maintain safety, correct posture and technique in using instruments and technologies</li> <li>• build on their understanding from previous bands of the roles of artists and audiences as they engage with more diverse music</li> <li>• improvise and arrange music, using aural recognition of texture, dynamics and expression to manipulate the elements of music to explore personal style in composition and performance (ACAMUM099)</li> </ul>