

Music Education: Right from the Start

An Understanding of Quality School Music Education

This explainer summarises the understanding of quality school music education adopted by **Music Education: Right from the Start**, a collaborative, national initiative led by Alberts | The Tony Foundation. It has been developed both to guide our own efforts and to encourage a common understanding of this critical question in our collaboration with those who share our commitment to music education. While the explainer recognises that music learning can be, and so often is, enjoyed throughout our lives, the focus here is on quality music education in primary schools.

A quality music education is above all centred on the student and, in common with learning more generally, flourishes when it is connected to students' lives and experiences, and is engaging and enriching.

The explainer has been produced by neuromusical educator Dr Anita Collins and the Music Education: Right from the Start project team in close consultation with music education academics and educators. It draws directly on the substantive body of existing research. Recognising that we are operating in a dynamic research and educational environment, we expect this understanding will continue to be refined over time.

Definition

Music education is a field of study associated with the teaching and learning of music.

Quality music education touches on all domains of learning, including the psychomotor domain, the cognitive domain, and, in particular and significant ways, the affective domain, including music appreciation and sensitivity.

Quality music education delivers practical (physical development/practical skills), cognitive (learning development), and non-cognitive (human development) benefits.

Quality school music education aims to establish an enduring engagement with music for students, from which lifelong benefits flow.

Music learning for musical and cognitive development

Quality music education includes active listening, singing, moving, playing a musical instrument, and composing/song writing. These five elements are required to ensure that each student's auditory and sensorimotor processing, neural processing and sensory integration are developed gradually and effectively through all stages of their development. Focusing solely on one or two of these learning vehicles will not ensure that musical and cognitive development occurs.

Quality music education is an ongoing, sequential learning experience. To ensure that both permanent and positive cognitive development and deep musical learning and appreciation occur, these learning experiences must take place in an ongoing and sequential manner.


Quality music education is impacted significantly by the time spent on the instrument: time doing private practice, rehearsal, performance, and deliberate and direct instruction from an expert teacher all impact on the time in years that leads to cognitive development. Genetic, personality and environmental factors also play a large role in the impact of music learning on cognitive development.

The vehicles through which quality music education occurs continue to evolve and are valuable beyond the school years into adult life.

Guiding Principles

Music development in schools

Description of music learning pathways



Quality music education is guided by teaching practices that include:

1. Authentic and rigorous learning experiences – students learn to do the things that musicians do with an increasing level of difficulty.
2. Increasing levels of challenge through effective scaffolding – students are expertly lead through each new challenge in their music making.
3. Recognition that music is for all – coming to music with different abilities and social and cultural experiences, students learn to value the rich diversity of musical genres, instruments and traditions.
4. Acknowledgement of the joy that music making brings – students learn to seek the intrinsic reward that working consistently on their music making can bring.

Music learning in the school curriculum context is typically delivered in two different pathways: Introductory and Extended Learning. Introductory Learning consists of musical experiences delivered for a short period of time. Extended Learning consists of ongoing, sequential music education that is delivered over a number of consecutive years.

Quality music education is an Extended Learning experience. To ensure that both permanent and positive cognitive development and deep musical learning and appreciation occur, these learning experiences must take place in an ongoing and sequential manner.

Quality music education cannot be achieved through a program of single, one-off musical experiences alone, or disconnected programs that run for only one school term or semester per year. These introductory experiences can be beneficial to the extent they are enjoyable, engaging, and may connect to students' out-of-school interests. However, they do not on their own constitute a quality music education as they may not challenge the students' cognitive capacity or provide authentic and rigorous music learning experiences to ensure that musical and cognitive enhancement is achieved.

Introductory music learning and pathways on an instrument are those that:

- Require 5-10 weeks to master at an introductory level
- Allow for significant levels of repertoire suitable for educational settings
- Are learned primarily in a class group.

Examples: Acoustic guitar, ukulele, soprano recorder, classroom percussion for early childhood, keyboard, and group singing.

These instruments can also be learned in an extended pathway; however, in the educational context in Australia, they are often used for beginner or introductory music education programs.

Extended music learning and pathways on an instrument demands a level of competence that:

- Requires 5-10 years to technically master
- Allows for significant levels of repertoire across technical styles, multiple musical genres and cultures
- Can be played in ensemble and individual contexts, requiring a high level of musicality, technical ability and executive function
- Includes both reproducing music written by others and producing (composing/song writing) music written by themselves.

Composing is the act of creating an original piece or work of music, either vocal or instrumental. This can be achieved through various mediums including song writing, improvising and utilising various artistic and cultural styles. For the purposes of this Document, the term composing/song writing will be used to refer to the creation of music.

Examples: Brass, woodwind, percussion and orchestral string instruments, acoustic and electric guitar, keyboard instruments, voice, and includes instruments that use genre-specific notation from many cultures. Extended learning should include learning through ensembles such as band, choir, orchestra or instrument groups.

Vehicles and foci for music learning

Quality music education must be **active** in nature and should include:

1. Listening, singing, movement, playing musical instruments, and composing/song writing, at all levels of development.
2. An understanding that quality music learning requires disciplined and effective scaffolded educational experiences, with a goal of developing sound musical skills over time (many years). Musical experiences alone that do not transcend participation and/or student enjoyment do not qualify.
3. Reading musical notation [see: [Definitions](#)], development of significant technical and musical skills, developmentally appropriate technical language, and high expectations of personal and musical performance.
4. Learning delivered by a teacher with knowledge and skills in music learning.
5. Experiences that are gained through individual or small group tuition as well ensemble-based experiences and should include regular performances which challenge the individual player and group.
6. Experiences through technology and online music collaborations in conjunction with hands on and in-person music learning.

Educational delivery

Quality music education in schools

1. Utilises pedagogies and teaching practices that result in both musical and cognitive development as described as Active Music Learning in the Music Education definition.
2. Occurs in schools and during the school timetable at all years of primary school education.
3. Occurs on school grounds or school associated venues.
4. Follows school curriculum aligned with the Australian Curriculum.
5. Is delivered by school teachers as well as external specialists and parents and community members.
6. Delivers the full scope outlined by the curriculum.
7. Acknowledges cultural and artistic backgrounds of the students, and recognises the diversity of genres and cultural traditions.
8. Includes planned formal learning and assessment which is structured and sequential.
9. Is predominantly curricular, meaning it occurs within the curriculum of the school and not as a paid or optional extra. The curricular learning may be complemented by additional co-curricular music learning delivered at the school by teachers associated closely with the school or system and acts as an extension, not a substitute, for the curricular learning.

Outcomes and benefits

Quality music education is learning and teaching that results in musical and cognitive development that provides:

1. Continual support for the social and emotional wellbeing and academic development of students' throughout their school years.
2. A deep appreciation and understanding of music as an artform that will be maintained into adult life.
3. Positive and permanent cognitive enhancement that will be maintained into adult life.

About Music Education: Right from the Start

Our vision is that all Australian primary school students need, and have a right to, a quality, sequential and ongoing music education.

Music Education: Right from the Start is a collaborative, national initiative, led by Alberts | The Tony Foundation. It is driven by a shared belief in the power of music to change lives. It has been developed in collaboration with individuals and organisations spanning the music industry, education, research, and philanthropy. For more information, contact us or visit our website:

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