

Advocacy for Music Education in Aotearoa

We must advocate for music education because it matters.

This article is an abridgement of a more comprehensive paper which gives, in greater detail, the backstory, referenced evidence and the bureaucratic roadblocks to overcome. Hopefully it provides motivation to join forces with other national subject associations to gain ground from the growing dissatisfaction with the status quo amongst educationalists and observers. The full paper has ammunition for ongoing advocacy including links to international research on the value of music for the whole learner and examples of overseas music education strategies.

Let's start by recognising and applauding the good things that are happening for music in schools, such as The Big Sing, Auckland Ukulele Trust, ASB PolyFest.

And we note that by and large, music in secondary schools is doing alright. Secondary schools employ music teachers, use their talents and provide facilities.

But there is a crisis in primary school music. What's happening there does not represent the grass-roots human right of music for all: the rights of all tamariki in all primary schools and ECE settings and Kohanga Reo to receive quality music learning in line with the compulsory NZ curriculum. To the disadvantage of many many learners, some things are simply not working: teacher training, PLD, all schools determining their own curriculum priorities ...

Primary school classroom teachers who know that music is an important component of learning are too often on their own. They need a professionally recognised group of music educators to seek support and advocate on their behalf. THAT'S MENZA!

There's a big payback for secondary and tertiary music. Imagine the boost if all contributing schools delivered quality progression-based music education at every level from Year 1.

Pressure has to be put on the Ministry of Education to:

- a. fund a different set of outputs from initial teacher education (ITE) providers that place highest value on major time and attention to research-based effective classroom practice;
- b. reclaim responsibility for NZ's education system by taking a far more active role in curriculum delivery, resourcing and support for schools and teachers;
- c. give the arts appropriate weighting in the curriculum with a consistency from ECE to tertiary.

It's incumbent upon us to campaign for the things that often worked successfully and effectively in the past to be re-shaped, enhanced and customised for today's circumstances and today's ākongā.

SETTING THE SCENE

Lack of Support for teachers and principals

For decades, we have not had an education system at all ... The Ministry of Education's senior ranks have been stripped of educators and people who understand learning ... School principals have been denied leadership support, boards have been overwhelmed with tasks they are not capable of doing, and worst of all, teachers have been left unsupported in delivering and assessing the curriculum [Bali Haque MNZM]¹

In today's NZ education environment, a curriculum area such as music relies on weekend workshops run by subject associations or 'Networks of Expertise' which only touch a relatively small number of schools and for a limited period.

Inadequate teacher training

Teacher training is critical. Universities are mainly in charge of this, but their high focus on bestowing academic degrees and on research falls well short of the mark when it comes to what a beginner teacher needs to know and be able to do confidently when faced with a classroom of primary students.

NGTs [newly graduated teachers] are emerging from their ITE programmes needing to substantially develop their understanding of pedagogy, curriculum, assessment practice, and working with diverse learners and their parents and whānau.²

Teacher training in music pedagogy is particularly poorly served

The disestablishment of teachers' colleges has meant that dedicated music suites have been mothballed. These are where teacher trainees – especially those with potential to be the music leaders in their schools – were given opportunities to learn an instrument, to participate in beginner ensembles and choirs, and grow in confidence.

As music is not a STEM subject, music pedagogy is relegated to less than six hours in total over three years. In some cases, trainees get nothing at all before they enter the classroom as beginning teachers.

The current monitoring of teacher training programmes puts graduates in a very vulnerable position. Clearly there is no realistic expectation that the institutions will deliver beginning teachers with the range of skills and understandings that are required to meet teacher registration criteria. [Linda Webb]

MINISTRY INDIFFERENCE

In August 2022, An article appeared in the Dominion Post, and nationally in Stuff³. The message from the sector experts was:

The arts are not taught sustainably in New Zealand schools or in teacher training.

Towards the end of the article a Ministry of Education official told readers that

The Ministry is committed to supporting children to engage with the arts, and support teachers to deliver arts learning ... schools could provide arts education to meet the needs and interests of their students.

Through an Official Information Act request, we asked for the evidence the Ministry of Education holds which enables its official to give such an assurance so confidently.

The Ministry's response merely provided us with a list of inputs (grants and funding) and outputs (programmes and information) but did not give us any evidence of outcomes (results) being achieved in schools in the arts.

When we pointed out this shortcoming in its OIA response, the Ministry replied that:

...it appears that you are seeking an opinion or explanation. We are therefore refusing your request under section 18(g) of the Act.

But, our OIA was not seeking an opinion. We just wanted proof that schools are providing arts education to meet the needs and interests of their students.

IN THE WAKE OF THE TOMORROW'S SCHOOLS REFORMS (1989)

Under Tomorrow's Schools, the Ministry does not consider curriculum its business. The Ministry line is, schools have flexibility to deliver their own local curriculum's based off the New Zealand Curriculum.

This means that officials can sidestep and claim that if ākonga are missing out on the music and arts, that's because the schools they attend have chosen to prioritise other things.

But when schools decide on the balance of their 'local' curriculum:

- **it is not a level playing field** in the context of pressures placed on teachers and schools by government-led testing for literacy and numeracy and calls by politicians to get 'back to basics';
- **many schools don't know what they don't know.** More and more of the present generation of boards, principals and teacher-leaders have little or no experience of the wide benefits of a vibrant arts programme;
- **schools do not have equitable access to resources and expertise.** Some schools can 'buy in' specialist teachers because they are able to charge large activities fees. For too many schools this is not an option.

Furthermore central government has abdicated its obligations for:

- initial teacher education;
- in-service teacher professional learning development;
- producing appropriate resources.

OPPORTUNITIES TO MAKE PROGRESS IN 2023

Meeting with the Minister of Education

In February, we met Hon Jan Tinetti in her office in the Beehive and talked to these points:

- All children in our primary schools have the right to quality music learning.

- We know that too many schools are unable to deliver quality music education.
- Teacher training in music is woeful and in-service teacher support is fragmentary.
- There is a vacuum of leadership and accountability at central government level.
- Music is fundamental to being human, whether individually or in a group.
- We want to work with the Ministry on a way forward: this meeting is only the start.

The Minister instructed the senior official attending to be our liaison point with the Ministry of Education. We have subsequently been invited to be 'critical friends' for The Arts section of the Curriculum Refresh.

At last we have an open direct line of communication with senior Ministry officials.

THE CURRICULUM REFRESH

Irrespective of the value of the drivers for the 'refresh' in other curriculum areas, we know that the arts are totally about respecting and nurturing differing knowledge perspectives and legitimising and celebrating all cultural backgrounds.

We perceive that the curriculum refresh process gives the Ministry an excuse to delay investment in better teacher training and better in-depth longer-term PLD – investments that in The Arts are seriously overdue. Our position, as 'critical friends' is it would be far more strategic to lay the groundwork for the refresh by doing things now which increase the accessibility and importance of the arts in the school day, every school day.

If ākonga at primary-age level – and from any background – are not succeeding in music and the arts, the reason has little to do with words missing from the present curriculum statement (for example regarding Te Tiriti o Waitangi and indigenous cultures). It is simply that most teachers do not have the skills and confidence to teach music and the arts:

Helen Willberg reinforces this point from her own experience

The rise of Te Matatini etc is affecting all schools and preschools where Māori music is alive if not well. The children I am in contact with get only Māori songs and recorded music. My bringing body percussion and flax rakau has been a revelation to the vocally challenged teachers I currently work with. So easy.

We have told the Ministry there is already a severe shortage of primary teachers skilled in music, and who could be redeployed as local or school-based resource teachers, mentors or advisers. By the time the refresh is ready to be brought to life in the classroom those with the expertise will have retired.

NATIONAL MONITORING STUDY OF STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

The report of the 2021 National Monitoring Study of Student Achievement (NMSSA) in the Arts⁴ has robust evidence that the arts in schools are not doing well. For instance:

- The proportion of Year 8 students achieving at or above curriculum expectations fell from 62% in 2015 to 52% in 2021.
- Most teachers indicated that at least 5 to 10 hours were dedicated to each [arts] discipline over the year. [i.e. an average of 7.5 hours annually = 11 minutes per week over a 40 week school year].
- About half of principals rated dance, drama and music as having relatively low priority relative to other learning areas... [and] indicated no developmental focus in the arts in the past five years.

These findings prompted us to ask the Ministry, as a key stakeholder in this research, how it is responding to this report. The Ministry replied that

The most recent NMSSA report has been considered by The Arts Writing Group as part of the refresh of the NZC.

As noted above, the Ministry thinks that a refreshed curriculum document will be the panacea: that somehow the refresh will 'make good' for the decades of appalling teacher training and negligible PLD in the arts.

SOME SUPPORT IN THE MEDIA

On 8 March 2023, Arts reporter André Chumko wrote in the Dominion Post and Stuff⁵:

A new report describing plummeting achievement rates in the arts in New Zealand primary schools should be a wake-up call for officials on taking the arts education crisis seriously advocates say.

Principals clearly did not understand what the arts were or what they could do for students, said Peter O'Connor, an arts expert from the University of Auckland.

"When we had the best literacy and numeracy rates in the world, we had strong arts in primary schools. It's a tragedy that link isn't in here ... We've lost so much, no-one really cares."

Commentator (and playwright), Dave Armstrong took a different tack:⁶

... has it occurred to anyone that while you can combat truancy with a stick, you can also use a carrot? Could a comprehensive, well-taught arts programme – especially in low-decile schools, which the report says often miss out – give more students reasons for attending school?

IN THE INTERESTS OF GAINING CROSS PARTY BUY-IN ...

Our advocacy team met earlier this year with two representatives of the NZ National Party: Chris Bishop is ranked 3rd in the National line-up and Chair for the 2023 Election Campaign; and Emma Chatterton, candidate for

Remutaka, has been a music teacher at schools in Lower Hutt, Auckland and across the UK.

Alas, a month after we met with Bishop and Chatterton, the National Party launched its education policy "Teaching the Basics Brilliantly"⁷. Most ominously it features a specific policy of "... an hour each on reading, writing, and maths every day".

So ... little room for much else in the school day. What about science, the new history curriculum, PE & Health, let alone the four distinct arts disciplines? Where does this leave teachers who are great at motivating learners by integrating maths, science, literature, social studies and the arts into holistic units of work?

WHAT NEXT?

If Labour retains the Treasury benches after October, MENZA and fellow subject associations must step up and bestow the Minister of Education with the mettle to challenge her Ministry's indifference concerning the value of the arts and music in primary school classrooms.

If we get a National-led Government after the election, we know that National ministers are not afraid to challenge their ministry's officials and welcome contestable advice. It is imperative that this comes from sector experts, not just from business lobby groups. MENZA must be ready, willing, and up for it.

We owe it to the next generation. As Catherine Gibbs writes:

Music teachers know that there's something much deeper going on and perhaps it connects with leaving a legacy or at least making a difference for the next generation... It's actually about tapping into something that is the lifeblood of being human. It is emotional, it is creative, it is always working towards greater harmony, it is deeply satisfying.

And that's why we can't think of a reason why advocacy is not part and parcel of our professional roles in the system.

¹ <https://www.stuff.co.nz/taranaki-daily-news/news/300930633/school-education-reforms--lots-of-churn-and-continued-decline>

² <https://ero.govt.nz/our-research/newly-graduated-teachers-preparation-and-confidence-to-teach>

³ <https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/education/129487021/the-unrecognised-crisis-of-arts-education-in-new-zealand>

⁴ https://nmssa-production.s3.amazonaws.com/documents/2021_NMSSA_The_Arts.pdf.

⁵ <https://www.stuff.co.nz/entertainment/arts/131434827/schools-treat-arts-as-low-priority-despite-link-to-numeracy-and-literacy>

⁶ <https://www.stuff.co.nz/opinion/300828827/dave-armstrong-you-can-combat-truancy-with-a-stick-you-can-also-use-a-carrot>

⁷ https://www.national.org.nz/teaching_the_basics_brilliantly



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