

JOURNAL OF
Music
RESEARCH ONLINE

A JOURNAL OF MUSICAUSTRALIA

The psychosocial benefits of school music: reviewing policy claims

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Introduction

The benefits believed to follow from music participation in education settings have gained substantial exposure in recent years. This exposure can be traced to several high-profile academic publications from the 1990s and early-to-mid 2000s, which suggested that music could play an important role in student development. Along with intrinsically musical benefits such as creativity and musical competence ([Burton, Horowitz and Abeles 1999](#)), such reports have focused on the development in non-musical domains such as the academic ([Cheek and Smith 1999](#)) and the cognitive ([Rauscher, Shaw and Ky 1995](#)). Others have taken a broader perspective, suggesting links between music participation and the general growth of young people ([Teachout 2005](#); [Fiske 1999](#)) in areas such as psychosocial development ([Deasy 2002](#)). Policymakers have increasingly drawn on these suggested links when drafting education policy recommendations at both national ([MCEETYA and CMC 2007](#)) and international ([UNESCO 1999, 2006](#)) levels. These documents often advocate for music in mainstream education on the basis that it will lead to improved student outcomes in these musical and non-musical spheres ([Australian Government 2005](#)).

However, while policy-based advocacy has grown, academics have increasingly questioned the absolutist stance that students' music participation will always lead to the proposed benefits. For example, many now question claims for a causal link between musical training and improved academic performance or cognitive function ([Mehr et al. 2013](#); [Schellenberg 2011a](#)). Consequently, the focus in recent policy documentation in Australia has shifted away from academic and cognitive benefits and re-focused on using psychosocial benefits to justify increased support for school music ([Parliament of Victoria 2013](#)). However, policymakers have thus far paid scant attention to the research surrounding these psychosocial benefits. And, existing research suggests that while music participation has enormous potential in supporting student psychosocial wellbeing ([Baker and Jones 2006](#); [Cheong-Clinch 2009](#); [McFerran and Teggelove 2011](#)), these benefits cannot be assumed to always follow ([Grimmett et al. 2010](#)). Rather, certain conditions must be met, or avoided, for the benefits to occur ([Crooke and McFerran 2014](#)).



This article aims to critically examine claims made in Australian policy literature regarding both the psychosocial wellbeing benefits of school music and the types of music participation said to achieve them. It does this by identifying claims made in recent policy literature and systematically exploring whether or not they are supported by current research evidence. In doing so it aims to identify what Stevens and Stefanakis (2014) call the ‘unsubstantiated assertions’ made by policy and other advocacy bodies regarding the benefits of music in mainstream education. In particular, it will be argued that while music instruction (or music education) may be useful in achieving other musical and non-musical benefits, assuming that music participation in this form will necessarily result in observable psychosocial wellbeing outcomes is unjustified. Rather, it is argued that for such benefits to occur, music participation needs to take on a form that departs from the dominant model in school-based music which focuses on participation as a class-based activity. The position taken here is that, if policymakers are committed to supporting the wellbeing of students and wish to take advantage of the significant potential that music holds for achieving this, a wider view of school music must be adopted to include, for example, music programs that are delivered outside of classrooms, tailored to the needs of specific schools and student groups and are designed specifically for wellbeing. It is suggested that principles of music therapy offer a useful framework for meeting these goals. An argument is also made that recommendations in this area must be based on more than anecdotal reports.

Policy Support for Music and the Arts in Australian Education

Policy-based advocacy for the place of music in Australian schools has grown considerably over the last 15 years. This can be seen as part of a global call for the need to reconnect with the positive impacts of the arts in education around the turn of the century. This call was evidenced by numerous international policy documents that advocated for student participation in the arts on the grounds of everything from quality education provision (UNESCO 2006), economic stability (Bamford 2006) to wellbeing (Bahri 2006) and world peace (UNESCO 1999).

In Australia, this advocacy became evident in the early 2000s. Beginning at the state level, commissioned reports such as *ARTSsmart* (SA Department of Education & Children’s Services 2002) promoted the role of the arts in the intellectual and cultural development of children. This reached the federal level in 2005 with a research report undertaken for the Australian Government’s Australia Council for the Arts (Hunter 2005). The report argued that students’ participation in the arts leads to a range of positive education and wellbeing outcomes for young people and their communities and recommended the implementation and support of artistic activities in all Australian schools.

In the same year, the Federal Governments’ Department of Education Science and Training (DEST) commissioned a national review of the provision of music education in schools (Australian Government 2005). The Review’s findings espoused the unique role that music plays in student development and subsequent recommendations called for government backing in providing equal access to quality music programs in schools across the country. Since then, several key policy documents have further argued that music (Parliament of Victoria 2013) and the arts more generally (MCEETYA and CMC 2007), should be supported in all schools for their capacity to promote both intrinsic and extrinsic benefits. This in turn has led to a place for music in the national curriculum (ACARA 2011) and recent funding promises for music education in some states (Victorian Labor 2014).

The Proposed Benefits of School Music

Advocacy for music in schools has predominantly focused on the idea that music participation leads to numerous student benefits which can be divided into three categories: intrinsic benefits; extrinsic benefits related to cognition and academic achievement; and extrinsic benefits related to subjective, or psychosocial, wellbeing. While the degree of separation between these categories has been challenged by some (Taylor 2008), they are widely used to discuss the benefits of school music in academic (Gill and Rickard 2012), policy (Australian Government 2005) and education (Stewart 2007) literature.

The term ‘intrinsic benefits’ includes uniquely musical and cultural benefits (Ewing 2010). These include musical competence, but also refer to the pleasure and personal growth associated with musical engagement (Gill and Rickard 2012; Taylor 2008). In addition, they refer to the capacity of music to (i) encourage engagement with, and empathy for, cultural, social and environmental issues (Jones 2010)



(ii) provide opportunities for self-expression ([McCarthy et al. 2004](#)) and (iii) promote creativity and thinking skills ([Deasy 2002](#); [Fiske 1999](#)) which are valued in today's knowledge economy ([Lebler 2007](#); [Wyszomirski 2004](#)). While many scholars argue that the value of these benefits is overlooked in advocacy for the inclusion of music in schools ([Stewart 2007](#); [Taylor 2008](#)) mention of such benefits has been prominent in policy literature and consistently used to form arguments for increased resourcing in this area ([Australian Government 2005](#); [Garrett 2009](#); [Parliament of Victoria 2013](#)).

The term 'extrinsic benefits' include the non-musical ([Gill and Rickard 2012](#)) or extra-musical ([Stevens and Stefanakis 2014](#)) outcomes of music participation and are frequently divided into two further groups. The first of these contains several benefits related to academic and cognitive development. Researchers have reported links between musical training and academic performance in areas of language acquisition ([Kennedy and Scott 2005](#)), reading ([Babo 2004](#)) and numeracy ([Catterall, Capleau and Iwanga 1999](#)). Similar links have been reported for cognitive functions such as verbal memory ([Roden, Kreutz and Bongard 2012](#)), IQ ([Schellenberg 2004](#)) and spatial-temporal performance ([Rauscher and Zupan 2000](#)). Together these benefits have been put forth as the strongest case for supporting school music ([Taylor 2008](#)), bringing about what some term a 'new paradigm shift' within music education, where academic outcomes in non-musical areas are cited as the primary reason for teaching music ([Vitale 2011](#)). These benefits have influenced policy both here ([ACARA 2011](#)) and abroad ([Schellenberg 2001](#)) and attracted significant media attention ([Schellenberg 2004](#)). Many local policy documents focus primarily on these outcomes in arguments for increased resourcing ([Australian Government 2005](#); [Victorian Labor 2014](#)). Despite this dominance, scholars have increasingly argued that links between music and the extrinsic benefits are more complex than previously reported ([Corrigall, Schellenberg and Misura 2013](#)). Some query claims of a simplistic causal relationship ([Schellenberg 2011a](#)), while others question whether or not the benefits extend to non-musical domains of achievement and development ([Mehr et al. 2013](#)). Further, where positive effects have been identified, they are increasingly linked to specific conditions or processes not always included in school music programs ([Stevens and Stefanakis 2014](#)). Consequently, many scholars now argue using academic and cognitive development 'as a justification for music in educational syllabi [...] may be seen as somewhat naïve and unsubstantiated given the uncertainty surrounding these claims' ([Robertson 2009: 81](#)). This notion is also reflected in more recent policy documentation. The Parliament of Victoria's ([2013](#)) *Inquiry Into the Extent, Benefits and Potential of Music Education in Victorian Schools* not only acknowledges limitations to claims of academic and cognitive benefits, but demonstrates a discernable shift in emphasis towards another group of extrinsic benefits: psychosocial wellbeing.

Extrinsic benefits embraced under the term 'psychosocial wellbeing' ([Gill and Rickard 2012](#)) include improved self-esteem ([Costa-Giomi 2004](#)) and anger management ([Currie 2004](#)), enhanced social, emotional and psychological functioning ([Teachout 2005](#)), increased school and community engagement ([Ewing 2010](#)) and numerous other mental health improvements ([Karkou and Glasman 2004](#)). While such benefits have long been used to bolster policy-based advocacy for music in schools, they have predominantly been referred to in sweeping introductory statements and rarely addressed in detail throughout the rest of the document. However, over the last decade these benefits have become increasingly central to arguments in this area and, as evidenced by the Parliament of Victoria's inquiry, have arguably overtaken academic and cognitive development as the most important non-musical benefits of school music.

Whether this is due to scholars' efforts to distance themselves from the idea that 'music can make you smarter', or the recent policy demand for promoting students' subjective wellbeing ([MCEETYA 2008](#)) is as yet unclear. What does seem clear, however, is that the same questions currently surrounding the academic and cognitive benefits may be repeated here. Comparatively little research has been conducted in this area ([Gill and Rickard 2012](#)), meaning that less is known about the relationship between students' music participation and psychosocial wellbeing. This is both driven and compounded by the subjective nature of psychosocial wellbeing, which has made measuring this relationship particularly challenging. Consequently, not only has research struggled to find consistent indications for a link, there is some evidence which contradicts the idea that music participation in this context will achieve psychosocial benefits ([Rickard, Bambrick and Gill 2012](#)). What's more, when these benefits are identified, they are rarely associated with forms of music participation advocated by policymakers ([Cheong-Clinch 2009](#); [McFerran and Crooke](#) In press), leading some to argue that the types of programs needed to achieve psychosocial wellbeing are in contrary to those recommended in policy ([Crooke and McFerran 2014](#)).

While notable scholarly work has evaluated whether the models of school music recommended by policymakers will improve academic and cognitive development ([Stevens and Stefanakis 2014](#); [Robertson 2009](#); [Murray 2014](#)), no one has systematically reviewed this



advocacy in relation to the psychosocial benefits. By first identifying where, when and how policymakers have made these claims over the last decade, this paper aims to interrogate policy-based advocacy in this area using existing research. This interrogation aims to bring existing evidence in this area to the attention of policymakers, so as to inform how policy in this area should be revised or expanded. It is argued that such a revision is necessary to grant students access to the numerous psychosocial benefits that school-based music participation can afford.

Policy Claims for the Psychosocial Wellbeing Benefits of Music participation in Mainstream Schools

The claim that music participation in mainstream schools will lead to increased student psychosocial wellbeing can be traced to the *National Review of School Music Education* (NRSME) report, published by the Australian Government's Department of Education, Science and Training ([Australian Government 2005](#)). This report represents a landmark in the ongoing struggle for music practitioners and educators to gain recognition for the benefits of music in mainstream education settings. It was the first comprehensive government funded review of music in Australian schools. In revealing the paucity and inequity of school music provision, it has become an invaluable reference point for those arguing the need to increase the status and resources allocated to music programs in government-funded education.

The NRSME used a multimethod research approach that included a review of existing research, site visits, a national survey of over 600 schools and the review of nearly 6000 submissions from individuals and organisations. Results from this review led to the claim that music is both 'valuable and essential for all Australian school students' ([Australian Government 2005: v](#)). Elaborating on this value, the review continues that:

Music education uniquely contributes to the emotional, physical, social and cognitive growth of all students. Music in schools contributes to both instrumental and aesthetic learning outcomes; transmission of cultural heritage and values; and, students' creativity, identity and capacity for self-expression and satisfaction. ([Australian Government 2005: v](#))

The unambiguous inclusion of 'emotional' and 'social' growth in this assertive statement shows an explicit expectation that music participation in schools will lead to psychosocial wellbeing benefits for *all* students. Using this as the opening statement of the entire review, which serves as the justification for the raft of recommendations to follow, further indicates the weight placed on these benefits and the conviction that they will be realised if its recommendations are followed. Interestingly (given their prominence in this opening passage), these psychosocial benefits gain less attention throughout the rest of the document which focuses mainly on intrinsic benefits related to musical competency, creativity and self-expression, the extrinsic benefits of academic performance in non-musical areas and the potential for cognitive development.

The next government document to advocate for music in schools was the *National Education and the Arts Statement*, released jointly by education and the arts ministers from state and federal tiers, as well as the Ministerial Council for Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs and the Cultural Ministers Council ([MCEETYA and CMC 2007](#)). While it covers all artistic mediums, this document represents the first direct statement from government at a national level for the need to support arts participation in schools. It stipulates that 'all children and young people should have a high quality arts education in every phase of learning' ([MCEETYA and CMC 2007: 5](#)). They base this recommendation on the claim that:

An education rich in creative arts [...] is vital to students' success as individuals and as members of society, emphasising not only creativity and innovation, but also the values of broad cultural understanding and social harmony that the arts can engender. ([MCEETYA and CMC 2007: 3](#))

While this document also contains a strong emphasis on learning and cultural outcomes, the focus here on social harmony, social participation and individual development, indicates an effort to connect school-based arts participation and psychosocial wellbeing. This connection is reinforced throughout the statement by drawing explicit links between school-based arts participation and community



engagement and social cohesion, as well as a sense of connectedness, belonging and bonding between and within communities, schools and families. At a more individual level, the statement also links arts in school to increased student ‘confidence and motivation’ and the ‘wellbeing and life skills of children and young people’ ([MCEETYA and CMC 2007: 4](#)).

It is unclear upon what basis the claims made in this national statement are made: the authors state only that it was ‘developed following extensive consultation with representatives within the arts and education sectors — both government and independent’ ([MCEETYA and CMC 2007: 3](#)). There is one reference to a government report prepared by Prime Minister’s Science, Engineering and Innovation Council (PMSEIC) about the social and economic value of the ‘creative imagination’ ([PMSEIC 2005](#)). Other claims in the MCEETYA and CMC’s statement are presumably based on the outcomes of their consultation, although there is little detail about this.

Peter Garrett, former Minister for the Environment, Heritage & the Arts, made a similar argument in a 2009 media release. Speaking on the prospect of including the arts in the national curriculum, Garret ([2009, para 5](#)) claims that along with a range of intrinsic, educational and economic benefits, ‘Arts education can also help address social exclusion’. While he does not specify which dimensions of social exclusion are likely to be addressed, it seems reasonable to assume — given he had already mentioned the academic, cognitive, economic, creative, artistic and cultural benefits — that he is referring to the social and subjective elements. This statement adds further support to government-based claims that participation in the arts, and by association music, will lead to student psychosocial wellbeing. While Garrett mentions the backing of international research for his statements, it is unclear which research this is and he refers to it mostly when discussing the development of minds and learning in other areas.

In articulating the intended nature of the national arts curriculum, ACARA’s ([2011](#)) Shaper Paper arguably represents the most tangible support for music in schools from a policy document. Citing both the NRSME ([Australian Government 2005](#)) and other major international policy documents ([Bamford 2006](#)), it too uses psychosocial benefits to justify recommendations for including music and other arts disciplines in the national curriculum. This is most obvious through the inclusion of ‘personal and social competence’ as one of the seven ‘general capabilities’ that ACARA claims students’ will develop through participation in the arts:

Students will have regular opportunities to identify and assess personal strengths, interests and challenges [...] They will discuss their emotions, reactions and interactions with others. They will observe modelling of effective personal and social skills and they will apply and practise their own personal and social skills. They will receive feedback and support from teachers and peers and monitor and reflect on their personal and social development. ([ACARA 2011: 24](#))

In describing benefits for ‘Intercultural understanding’, another of the seven ‘general capabilities’, ACARA states that arts participation will also develop students’:

Personal, interpersonal, cultural and social understandings, skills and dispositions. Students [will also] learn about their own languages and cultures, and those of others [and] make connections between their own worlds and those of others, building on shared interests and commonalities, and negotiate or mediate difference [...] The arts subjects offer opportunities for students to consider and represent their own beliefs and attitudes in different and new ways, gaining insight into both themselves and others, developing their abilities to empathise with others and to analyse intercultural experiences critically. ([ACARA 2011: 24](#))

Further, in the ‘general capability’ area of ‘Ethical Behaviour’, it is said arts education will help ‘students develop and apply ethical behaviour [...] develop their understanding of values and ethical principles [and] engage in moral decision making’ ([ACARA 2011: 24](#)). Other related benefits mentioned in the document include enhanced communication skills and improvements in community participation.

While these psychosocial benefits are not articulated as clearly or as often by ACARA as are the intrinsic benefits, or benefits for learning in other areas, they do show that psychosocial wellbeing benefits were used as a discernible justification for the national arts curriculum. Furthermore, the terminology used shows a clear alignment with the contemporary views of psychosocial wellbeing, suggesting a more developed understanding of how to describe this perceived relationship, or perhaps a recognition of the need to support this area of wellbeing in education settings.



The psychosocial wellbeing benefits of music participation also figure prominently in the Parliament of Victoria's inquiry paper. This was a government-funded inquiry into the state of music education, similar to the NRSME paper of 2005, but focusing on the state of Victoria. While it refers to some research papers, it focuses mainly on the input of a delegate group, public submissions from nearly 250 stakeholders, forums with students and school leaders, consultation with international music education experts and several public hearings across the state. The document reported that music provision had not changed significantly since the publication of the NRSME, remains unevenly distributed among Victorian schools, is concentrated in higher income communities, is lacking in quality and is effectively unsupported by government. Subsequent recommendations focus, as did the NRSME, on 'ensuring that all Victorian students have the opportunity to experience a meaningful music education [through] policy, a promotion plan to increase awareness about the benefits of music education [...] and increased training and support for teachers'. The recommendations also stress the need for resourcing the provision of adequate equipment and facilities in government schools.

The authors outline the justifications for their recommendations in 'The benefits of music education for students' section of this report. While intrinsic benefits top the list, the most notable additional benefits relate to elements of psychosocial wellbeing, which are allocated two sub-headed sections. The first of these is entitled 'The impact of music education on student engagement and wellbeing'. Citing existing Australian research, they state that music education improves student behaviour, school engagement, social and emotional wellbeing, persistence and resilience (Caldwell and Vaughan 2012; Imms, Jeanneret and Stevens-Ballenger 2011, as cited in Parliament of Victoria 2013). They further buttress the claim for enhanced student social and emotional wellbeing by referencing international research from authors such as Costa-Giomi (2004) and Fiske (1999), as well as their own stakeholder reports. They also state, based on stakeholder reports, that 'music [is] an important outlet for students to express their emotions and cope with the stress they might be experiencing at school' (Parliament of Victoria 2013: 16).

The next section, entitled 'The impact of music education on personal and social development' again cites claims in existing literature concerning the 'personal and social benefits for students [of] arts participation, including greater self-confidence, enhanced cooperation and collaboration and positive behavioural changes' (Hunter 2005, as cited in Parliament of Victoria 2013: 17). Similar (music related) benefits are reported, from stakeholder submissions, to include improved self-esteem, persistence, patience, as well as 'many essential life skills, such as self-discipline, team work, cooperation, confidence and commitment' (Parliament of Victoria 2013: 17). There is also reference to better social connectedness and 'emotional capabilities', which presumably refers to the ability to understand, respond to, and manage emotions.

Despite the overlap between these claims and subsections (and the fact that the first subsection includes mention of improved academic performance), the prominence of factors clearly relating to psychosocial wellbeing shows the weight given to this domain of benefits in the report. Conversely, the contribution of music participation to other areas of learning is given only one dedicated subsection, indicating a notable departure from the focus on this area in previous policy documents. This moderation is further evidenced by the fact that the benefits in this latter subsection are followed by reference to 'available literature [which] suggests that more research needs to be done before it is possible to conclude that music is directly responsible for many of the improvements in these more distantly related areas' (Parliament of Victoria 2013: 20).

As shown above, policymakers have used the proposed psychosocial benefits of school-based music participation consistently over the last decade to justify their recommendations for more music in schools. Furthermore, it would appear that recent policy reports have placed more emphasis on these benefits. As mentioned, this may relate to (i) the growing body of research that questions the potential of music participation to promote achievement in other areas (ii) the fact that scholars have increasingly critiqued policy documents which use these benefits as a justification and (iii) that policymakers have recognised this area of uncertainty. However, if policymakers are to now focus on claims regarding psychosocial wellbeing, it is important that these claims are given the same scrutiny. This includes examining the models of music participation that policymakers recommend for achieving these benefits and then comparing these recommended models with current research and recommendations in this field.



Mechanisms for achieving psychosocial wellbeing benefits

The same policy documents that outline claims for the psychosocial wellbeing benefits of music in schools also suggest, to varying degrees, models of music participation expected to achieve these benefits. The most obvious indication of this is in the titles of these documents. Both the *National Review of School Music Education* ([Australian Government 2005](#)) and the *Inquiry into the extent, benefits and potential of music education in Victorian schools* ([Parliament of Victoria 2013](#)) suggest forms of participation that occur in classroom or tuition settings only and which focus on music as an assessable curriculum activity, or skills-based lessons which aim to build technical expertise. Similarly, the *Shape of the Australian Curriculum: The Arts* ([ACARA 2011](#)) and the *Arts in Australia's National School Curriculum* ([Garrett 2009](#)) both indicate a focus on the arts as curriculum-based activities, which occur in classrooms, are delivered didactically and build towards assessable skills. Such a framing of music participation excludes a range of more collaborative, or less structured, skills-based, or gradable activities such as group music making, song sharing, or even music therapy activities and programs.

The recommendation that music participation in schools should be through music education classes is also discernible from more specific document wording. For example, the NRSME explicitly states that it is 'music education [that] uniquely contributes to the emotional, physical, social and cognitive growth of all students' [emphasis added] ([Australian Government 2005: v](#)). The authors also state that 'For the purpose of the Review: School music is the totality of music learning and teaching experiences and opportunities available in schools K–12' ([Australian Government 2005: ix](#)). The words 'totality of music learning' are broad enough to allow for interpretations of the term 'school music' which go beyond class-based learning. However, ubiquitous use of the terms 'music education', 'teachers' and 'curriculum' offer a clear indication that 'school music' in fact refers to activities that either build musical expertise or assessable knowledge and skills in an academic sense, or that occur in class settings. The only activities to stray slightly from this description are private instrumental and voice lessons, or school choirs and ensembles — all of which focus on musical training and skill.

Garrett's ([2009](#)) media release, while understandably brief given its nature, also places a clear focus on arts as a curriculum activity. By default this indicates that the benefits he claims will follow are all achievable through participation in curriculum-based activities.

While the Parliament of Victoria's ([2013](#)) inquiry also retains a strict emphasis on music participation in the form of education and curriculum (as evidenced through the headings of all major sections of the report), there is mention of other opportunities for music participation. For example, they refer to audience or performance-based involvement in community music events. However, this represents only a small part of the activities described, with the majority of programs referring to class-based music instruction, school bands and ensembles and other variations of private and semi-private instrumental programs which again focus on expertise and training. Again, the ever-present terms 'education', 'lessons', 'training', 'teachers' and 'curriculum' indicate the nature of music participation investigated and recommended in their report.

The only document to stray slightly from a firm focus on education, training and curriculum is the *National Education and the Arts Statement* ([MCEETYA and CMC 2007](#)), which instead advocates for education *and* the arts, education *through* the arts and education *rich in* the arts. It also articulates the arts and education systems as two separate but parallel entities and suggests a wider definition of the relationship between the two through the use of the term 'school-based arts participation'. While they suggest such school-based participation should be diverse in nature, there is no elaboration on what these diverse forms could be. The statement then goes on to claim that 'All children and young people should have a high quality arts education' ([MCEETYA and CMC 2007: 5](#)) and recommends the need for curriculum development, ultimately also suggesting a strong emphasis on education and curriculum-based activities.

ACARA's ([2011](#)) *Shape of the Australian Curriculum: The Arts*, referred to here as their Shape Paper, provides the clearest evidence that policy-based recommendations for increasing student psychosocial wellbeing through music are based on the assumption that such benefits will be achieved through music education. This paper provides a detailed review of the government supported model of music education in a curriculum setting, including recommendations for the specific activities and processes which will deliver the above benefits to students. State-based curricula documents are also available — such as the Victoria Curriculum and Assessment Authority's (VCAA) ([2012](#)) curriculum guidelines — but given the similarity between the two and the fact that the Shape Paper represents recent thinking at the national level, this paper will focus on the Shape Paper.



Acting on recommendations from the *National Education and the Arts Statement* ([MCEETYA and CMC 2007](#)) and similar international reports ([Bamford 2006](#)) ACARA's Shape Paper describes in detail how the arts-related curriculum-based activities are intended to achieve their aims. This includes all three types of benefits prominent in music and arts-based literature: intrinsic (creativity, musical literacy); extrinsic benefits related to academic and cognitive development; and extrinsic benefits related to psychosocial wellbeing. Interestingly, however, the detail used to describe how music contributes to the first of these two areas, is not present in relation to the last. While the Shape Paper maps out activities and processes linked to the acquisition of intrinsic and extrinsic benefits related to academic and cognitive development relatively clearly, how activities support the acquisition of psychosocial outcomes is not clear, if mentioned at all. Ultimately, given the recommendations are based around a model of music education, or curriculum-based activities undertaken in mainstream classrooms, there appears to be an assumption that this model will automatically produce a transfer of subjective wellbeing benefits.

It is argued here that this assumption is implicit in each of the key policy documents cited above. Consequently, the conclusion may be drawn that the policy recommendations for school-based music participation, and the arguments which underpin them, are based on two main suppositions: that music participation in mainstream schools will deliver psychosocial benefits for students and participation in the form of music education, or curriculum-based music classes, will facilitate this.

For the remainder of this paper, these assumptions will be interrogated and deconstructed using existing research evidence. Forms that are more directly designed to achieve psychosocial benefits in schools will also be discussed.

Evidence for the Psychosocial Benefits of School-Based Music Participation

The links between music in mainstream schools and psychosocial wellbeing, while receiving much less attention than areas related to intrinsic, cognitive and academic benefits, have been studied more actively in the last 10 years. These studies have used various methodologies and investigated a range of different musical programs. However, just as the studies have been diverse, results in this area have been inconsistent, making it difficult to determine whether a link between music in schools and psychosocial benefits to students is supported or not. Some studies have shown positive results. For example, music instruction has been credited for improving self-esteem ([Costa-Giomi 2004](#); [Hietolahti-Ansten and Kalliopuska 1990](#)), building coping strategies, developing social networks, cultivating pro-social behaviour ([McKegg et al. 2012](#)), improving self efficacy, developing school engagement ([Rusinek 2008](#)) and fostering a sense of happiness ([Devroop 2012](#)). School-based music programs have also been linked to reduced symptoms of psychological disorder ([Choi 2010](#); [Vaughan, Harris and Caldwell 2011](#)), improved anger management ([Currie 2004](#); [Jones, Baker and Day 2004](#); [Currie and Startup 2012](#)), improved affect, enhanced social functioning ([Cheong-Clinch 2009](#)), better social behaviours ([Kirschner and Tomasello 2010](#)), bolstered self-confidence and self-efficacy, increased self-acceptance, more developed group and social bonding and improved ability to cope with loss ([McFerran and Tegge love 2011](#)) and bereavement ([McFerran and Crooke](#) in press).

While promising, this evidence is somewhat undermined by a similarly significant body of literature which has reported inconsistent findings in this area. Many researchers have found mixed results for the capacity of school-based music to address internalising behaviour, build adaptive skills ([Baker and Jones 2006](#)), enhance self perception, grow coping skills ([McFerran, Roberts and O'Grady 2010](#)), develop social skills, improve social behaviours, bolster social competence ([Gooding 2011](#)), build social support, engender social acceptance, foster self worth, ([Shields 2001](#)) and address several other factors related to psychosocial wellbeing ([Kim et al. 2006](#)). Also included in this body of literature are several studies that have reported an absence of benefits. Such studies question links between school music and improved psychosocial wellbeing in areas including, enhanced social skills, improved behaviour ([Schellenberg 2004](#); [Rickard et al. 2012](#); [Michel and Farrell 1973](#)), increased self-esteem ([Darrow et al. 2009](#)), reduced anger expression ([Knox-Anderson and Rickard 2007](#)), mitigated anxiety, fostering of social relationships, diminished communication disturbance ([Rickson and Watkins 2003](#)) and a range of other psychosocial factors ([Rickard, Bambrick and Gill 2012](#)).

In some cases, music programs have been linked to diminished functioning in school contexts. Rickson and Watkins ([2003](#)) reported that group music sessions exacerbated behavioural problems in classroom settings. Rickard, Bambrick and Gill ([2012](#)) reported increased



aggression and reduced motivation in a school-based music intervention group when compared to non-arts control groups. Grimmett et al. (2010) also reported a lack of student engagement for young people participating in school-based musical instruction. They have gone on to contest results reported elsewhere (Rickard et al. 2012) that music participation improves self-esteem. Schellenberg (2011b) who found no link between music lessons and emotional intelligence went as far as concluding that the non-musical benefits of music instruction are limited to intellectual abilities only.

Psychosocial Wellbeing, Class-Based Music and Music Education

While there is evidence that music in schools can promote psychosocial wellbeing, the results reported in the above studies serve to caution against universalist policy claims that 'Music education uniquely contributes to the emotional [and] social [...] growth of all students' [emphasis added] (Australian Government 2005: v). The inconsistency of outcomes reported suggests links between school-based music and psychosocial benefits are, like cognitive and academic benefits, complex and not yet well understood.

Several researchers note that the context (or setting) of music participation potentially offers an explanation for the lack of, or inconclusive, results. Some posit that classroom settings are not conducive to promoting psychosocial benefits (Pitts and Davidson 2000; Rickson and Watkins 2003) as they are often chaotic environments (Shields 2001) that make it difficult to address the needs of individual students (Rickard, Bambrick and Gill 2012). Rickard, Bambrick and Gill conclude that music 'instruction might literally need to be offered outside of school' (2012: 13) to achieve psychosocial benefits — a premise supported by investigations of student participation in music instruction in external settings (Hietolahti-Ansten and Kalliopuska 1990). Further, other studies that have reported psychosocial benefits in school settings, investigated programs delivered outside classroom settings, either in private (Costa-Giomi 2004), or in semi-private groups (Cheong-Clinch 2009; Choi 2010; Devroop 2012; Gooding 2011; McFerran and Teggelove 2011).

The nature of music participation (including the purpose of programs, or activities and approach they employ) has also been cited as preventing conclusive or positive findings. This includes claims that music instruction programs can be insufficiently engaging (Rickard, Bambrick and Gill 2012; Rickard et al. 2012), or too structured (Grimmett et al. 2010) to achieve psychosocial benefits. This accords with the observation that non-training, or non-education based programs have the strongest associations with positive results. This is especially the case with school-based music therapy programs (Cheong-Clinch 2009; Gooding 2011; McFerran and Teggelove 2011; McFerran and Hunt 2008). Choi (2010: 402) attributes this to the 'innate characteristics of music therapy activities' that aid communication and foster support between group members. Others suggest it is the capacity to tailor music therapy programs to the needs of groups and individuals (McFerran 2010; Montello and Coons 1998; Rickson and Watkins 2003), an element of school-based music programs noted to be particularly important in recent Australian literature (Crooke and McFerran 2015; McFerran and Crooke 2014).

To test these ideas further, Crooke's (2015) Ph.D. project critically reviewed the elements of school-based music participation that are necessary to promote measurable improvements in student psychosocial wellbeing. The findings supported the above observations and identify a number of participation elements which are necessary for achieving the improvements (Crooke and McFerran 2014). Specifically, they suggest programs should be delivered in private or semi-private settings (outside of mainstream classroom contexts) and focus on wellbeing rather than curriculum or training program models. Further, classroom settings, as well as models of music participation based on academic, curriculum or training goals, were actually found to present barriers to achieving reportable psychosocial benefits.

Discussion

Policy recommendations that music participation should be supported in mainstream schools have increasingly used the argument that such participation will promote psychosocial wellbeing. While such outcomes have indeed been reported in the research literature, recent reports suggest that music participation must take on certain forms to achieve them. In reviewing existing policy literature in this country, this article has identified that the type of music participation advocated in policy literature not only fails to provide the elements necessary to achieve psychosocial wellbeing, but actually recommends activities which may inhibit their acquisition. This disconnect may be largely explained by Stevens and Stefanakis' (2014: 12) claim that much of the current advocacy surrounding music in schools 'rel[ies]



on subjective opinion' rather than evidence. Indeed, as described above, policy documents base their claims in this area primarily on anecdotal evidence, or the opinions of stakeholders, rather than scholarly research. Using academic and cognitive development to justify the inclusion of music in educational curricula has been noted by scholars as both naïve and unsubstantiated ([Robertson 2009](#); [Stevens and Stefanakis 2014](#)). While the recognition in policy documents that music participation can promote student psychosocial wellbeing is insightful, it is argued here that the associated assumption that music training or class-based music activities will always achieve these benefits is not only naïve and unsubstantiated, but unhelpful.

These conclusions have considerable implications for the nature of policy support regarding music in schools. Indeed, it must be agreed that more research is needed in this area before we reach a clear understanding of the relationship between music in schools and psychosocial wellbeing. However, as has been argued before ([Crooke and McFerran 2014](#)), much can be learnt from the existing literature in this area. For example, there is strong evidence to suggest that, if psychosocial wellbeing is the justification for, or an intended outcome of, school-based music participation, then policymakers must look beyond what appears to be a narrow view of school music. Music participation in this setting can, and does, take on many forms. This includes group programs (including but not limited to music therapy) that do not focus on training, education (in an academic sense), or pursue any sense of assessable achievement goals. Furthermore, there is a wealth of evidence that such programs are highly beneficial for student wellbeing and social development.

Therefore, policymakers or government departments committed to enhancing the subjective wellbeing of students through music must widen their advocacy to include support for programs located outside curriculums and classrooms. This may require an uncomfortable uncoupling of music from the concept of education and reconciliation with the idea that not everything that is good for our students happens inside a classroom.

Yet if we are to take a more philosophical approach, this uncomfortable separation may not be necessary. To return to the primary statements within the policy documents reviewed here, advocacy is fundamentally based on claims for the 'importance and significance of music in the education of all young Australians' ([Australian Government 2005: iii](#)). While this article has so far critiqued this claim when education is equated to curriculum or instruction, it can be argued that this original premise may still hold true. As Bowman ([2012](#)) suggests, it depends largely on how we define education and music participation. He ([2012: 27](#)) suggests that a student's education should not always be seen as formalised training, but as exposure to experience which 'demonstrably enhances their abilities to lead richer, more meaningful lives'. In this way, if students were given the chance to experience (or learn) the benefits of expressing their feelings by improvising on a djembe drum, or connecting with others through song lyrics, would this not be an important educational experience that could prepare them for a fulfilling life? To quote Bowman further, 'to argue the importance of music education is not quite the same as arguing that musical instruction be a required part of schooling' ([Bowman 2012: 22](#)).

Conclusion

Policymakers have used the argument that music participation in mainstream schools promotes student psychosocial wellbeing as a justification for supporting music education programmes for at least a decade. Overwhelmingly, the type of participation recommended by policymakers for achieving these benefits is music education in the form of instruction or curricula activities. While there is some evidence that music participation in school contexts may promote wellbeing in this area, overall findings are inconsistent and preclude any firm conclusion being drawn that supports these policy claims. Furthermore, existing research suggests that class-based music training is the form of participation most often linked to results which are inconclusive or negative. Thus, it is argued here that policy-based advocacy which uses psychosocial wellbeing as a justification for supporting music education in schools is, at this point, unsubstantiated. Implementing policy recommendations based on these claims is, therefore, a dangerous prospect. It is unlikely that the evaluation of any programs following this model will capture any benefits. This in turn has dire implications for the ongoing support of music in our schools. Therefore, it is recommended that policymakers extend their definition of music participation in schools to include programs that are more suitable for the important task of promoting the wellbeing of our students and our society.



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ABSTRACT

While policy-based advocacy for music in schools has previously focused on arguments for cognitive and academic benefits, scholars have increasingly critiqued this rationale. Such critique is now reflected in Australian policy documentation, which now emphasises psychosocial benefits as the most notable non-musical advantage of student music participation in mainstream schools. This paper uses recent research to review these claims, with a specific focus on the type of music participation that policy documents claim will achieve psychosocial benefits. This aims to both assess the suitability of current advocacy in this area, and bring existing evidence to the attention of policymakers. The article concludes that models of music participation must be broadened beyond the current definitions of music education if psychosocial benefits are to be experienced by students in mainstream schools.

Keywords: School music, psychosocial wellbeing, policy, extrinsic benefits, music programs, music participation

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Received by the editors 3 August 2015; accepted for publication (in revised form) 4 February 2016.