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Music Council of Australia

Inquiry for a National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care

Music in Early Childhood Education: a Submission from the Music Council of Australia

The Music Council of Australia is grateful for the opportunity to make this submission to the inquiry for A National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care. The Council's submission has been prepared by Dr Peter de Vries, an expert in early childhood education from Monash University, and approved by the Board.

The Music Council of Australia is the national peak organization for the music sector. It has a membership of 50, representative of the entire range of activities in the music sector, ranging from early childhood education to digital distribution and from opera to hip hop. The Council has taken a very strong interest in issues concerning music education and was partly responsible for the instigation of the Commonwealth's National Review of School Music Education of 2005 and developments since.

On September 5, the Council produced a summit for the music sector, Australian Musical Futures: Towards 2020. 100 leaders from the sector met for a full day of discussion. Among the highest priorities in its report was this recommendation:

Music training should be a requirement for all early childhood teachers and provision of such training should be added to the objectives following from the National Review of School Music Education.

This submission focuses on the provision of music in early childhood education in Australia. The submission provides:

- background about the current provision of music education in Australian early childhood education settings
- a rationale for the inclusion of music in early childhood education programs
- a brief outline of what quality musical experiences for children in early childhood settings might look like
- two core recommendations for improving the provision of music education in early childhood education.

The Music Council believes there is a simple solution to bringing to young children the great benefits following on from development of their musical (and consequently, other) abilities: provide a sufficient training in music and music teaching to all early childhood teachers. Teachers equipped with those skills would be bound to bring them to the children because both teacher and children love and benefit from music making.

There are no additional financial implications. Unlike the situation for primary and secondary schools, there are no additional costs in inclusion of a music program in the daily life of the early childhood centre.

Dr Richard Letts
Executive Director

The arts are an entitlement for all children (Fiske, 1999), not an optional part of a child's development and education. However, in Australia the arts, and in particular music, are an optional part of early education, whether that be in long day care, family day care, preschool, or the early years of primary school. Certainly in some of these settings and in some states of Australia children do have access to a visiting music teacher/specialist, and in some cases teachers and carers do in fact implement music as part of daily learning, but the research literature continually points to the fact that those teachers working in early childhood settings in Australia do not feel confident teaching music, believing they lack the requisite knowledge and skills to plan and teach music (Commonwealth of Australia, 1995; de Vries, 2006; Sharpe et al., 2005; Suthers, 2004). Not surprisingly then, the delivery of music instruction in early childhood settings is often viewed as being unsatisfactory, with Scott-Kassner (1999) pointing to early childhood programs lacking in musical direction.

In Australia the situation is particularly problematic, as Suthers (2007) has pointed out in identifying differing music education curriculum requirements from state to state and from early childhood service to service. As Suthers indicates, curriculum frameworks for early childhood music education are "deliberately broad", and in many cases are nothing short of vague, with little in the way of practical suggestions to guide teachers (p. 57). This, along with the aforementioned research indicating that teachers do not feel confident teaching music in early childhood settings, has largely contributed to the unsatisfactory provision of music education in early childhood settings in Australia.

Why music?

Music is an integral part of young children's lives, as evidenced in the ground-breaking research conducted by Moorehead & Pond (1941/1978) nearly seventy years ago, or the more recent rich and diverse ethnographic studies of young children's musical lives conducted by Campbell (1998). Children's play, so valued by the early childhood education community in fostering young children's learning and development, features music as a central component (Bjorkvold, 1989; Campbell, 1998; Campbell & Scott-Kassner, 2006).

Anyone who has worked with young children knows that children love music, and can engage in musical activities on many levels. From birth music is an intuitive form of communication between mother and baby (Papousek, 1996), and subsequently between growing child and caregiver/s. For more than a decade it has been apparent that from infancy human beings are quite simply hardwired for musical experience (Trehub et al., 1997). That is, *all* children are born with the innate ability to respond to music and to develop musically. However, without the right nurturing, musical ability will stall. Therefore it is vital that those involved in young children's growth – namely parents and educators - understand young children's musical development and understand ways that they can nurture this very powerful form of communication and being.

Music is something to be fostered in all young children. Doing this simply for the sake of each child's musical development should be argument enough for music to be an integral part of early childhood education. However, there are also countless other arguments for the inclusion of music in early childhood programs for all children, ranging across the many proven benefits that music has in other domains of young children's learning and development. For example, involvement in music experiences has been demonstrated to facilitate the development of literacy skills in young children (Adcock et al., 2008; Barclay, 1992; Fisher et al., 2001; Hurwitz et al., 1975; Lamb & Gregory, 1993; McCracken & McCracken, 1986; Moyeda et al., 2006; Register, 2001). In particular, involvement in music programs and experiences has resulted in the increase of young children's vocabulary (Moyeda et al., 2006) and increased development in auditory language (Gan & Chong, 1998). Young children's

engagement in developmentally appropriate singing and chanting activities has very clear links to literacy development, with children learning lyrics to chants and songs, and re-composing song lyrics (Barclay, 1992; Kenney, 1997).

Engagement in music programs has been shown to benefit many other areas of young children's development, such as spatial-temporal reasoning in elementary school aged children (Schellenberg, 2004) and preschool children (Bilhartz et al., 2000; Rauscher & Zupan, 2000). The benefits of having young children engaged in music education simply cannot be underestimated. It is a matter, as de Vries (2004) found, of exposing early childhood educators to musical skills and appropriate musical practices for young children, so that they can see the benefits of including music in their programs. In a case study of an early childhood teacher being exposed to such practices de Vries (2004) found the teacher noting that when engaged in music activities the children in her care developed in terms of motor skills, there was increased socialization amongst the children, children could release pent up energy, music provided a mode for self expression, and music focused children's listening skills. Early childhood educators need to be made aware of the numerous benefits of including music in their programs, and be exposed to the diverse range of musical activities that they can provide for the children in their care.

Quality musical experiences for children in early childhood settings

Early childhood educators need to understand musical development in early childhood. Children under the age of 2 are capable of so much when it comes to music, including engaging in vocal play, experimenting with sound (including manipulating simple musical instruments), and by 24 months are more than capable of singing short songs and improvising with known songs and creating their own songs. By the age of 5, if nurtured, children are capable of accurately singing longer songs, both in terms of pitch and rhythm, can play musical instruments alone or in a group, can keep a steady beat while singing or moving to recorded and live music, can move expressively to music, and differentiate between contrasting musical elements such as loud/soft and fast/slow.

With an understanding of what young children are musically capable of, early childhood educators can plan quality musical experiences for the children in their care. It should not just be left to a music specialist to provide music education for young children in early childhood settings as the specialist tends to have infrequent contact with children, essentially providing "a series of separated activities, relegating music to that isolated spot in the curriculum" (Fox, 1991, p. 28). The teacher/carer who is working with their children daily can program a music lesson, but more often than not there will be many moments throughout the day when music can become part of the children's day, whether this be singing songs and rhymes as part of care routines, or responding to, encouraging, talking about, and joining in with children's spontaneous musical play (Young, 2003). The "everyday and everywhere feature of children's music making" simply requires the early childhood educator to find multiple avenues of addressing children's musical development (Fox, 2000, p. 26).

In addition, early childhood educators need to understand and be able to implement the wide *variety* of musical activities that are appropriate for young children, including singing, playing musical instruments, composing music and notating music. Singing traditional children's songs as a group and moving to popular children's audio recordings simply does not adequately address children's musical development needs. Rather, educators need to provide a diverse range of musical experiences, experiences that are frequently combined with other arts areas such as dance and storytelling (Niland, 2007) and which provide opportunities for children to "create and experiment either through extensions to existing lessons or through dedicated time for small groups and individuals to manipulate, explore and create music" (Miranda, 2004, p. 59).

Ways forward in Australia

Earlier on in this position paper I indicated that two groups of people are largely responsible for young children's musical development: parents and educators. With research suggesting there is a sharp decline in parental singing and playing music for children after 24 months (Custodero et al., 2003) and a recent decline in parents singing to their infant children (Gembris & Davidson, 2002; Papousek,

1996), it appears that parents are not as involved in their young children's musical development. Parents need to understand young children's musical development and be able to nurture this in the home. de Vries (2007) found that parents are overly reliant on commercially available music resources such as CDs and DVDs for their children's engagement with music, having little understanding of what they should be nurturing when it comes to music. Therefore educating parents about how they can nurture their children's musical development in developmentally appropriate ways is vital. Just as vital is ensuring that teachers and carers working in early childhood settings are adequately trained and supported by well written curriculum documents and support materials to implement quality music education programs with the children in their care. In many ways teachers and carers, if adequately trained about the implementation of developmentally appropriate music activities in early childhood, can share this expertise with parents to ensure music development continues in the home environment.

As previously mentioned, in her recent overview of early childhood music education in Australia Suthers (2007) points to the complexity of policy for early childhood music education, citing the diverse range of curriculum guidelines and legislation across day care, preschool and the early years of school. This diversity across states, the "deliberately broad" frameworks and guidelines for music in early childhood settings (Suthers, 2007, p. 57), and the almost nationwide reduction in hours devoted to music and music education in pre-service teacher education programs (Pascoe et al., 2005), does not provide the basis for early childhood teachers to implement quality music experiences and programs in early childhood settings. There are clearly two areas of concern here which *can* be rectified: 1) making explicit the role and value of music education in early childhood curriculum documents, along with practical direction as to how music can be implemented in early childhood settings, and 2) the provision of more time in early childhood teacher pre-service courses devoted to music and music education.

The Music Curriculum

With the aforementioned diversity across states and sectors when it comes to music curriculum documents, and the lack of clear direction as to how music can be implemented, it is surely time to consider an overhaul of music curriculum in early childhood, along the lines of the American MENC (National Association for Music Education) pre-kindergarten standards and guidelines (1995). These national standards, supported by books and pamphlets, provide clear direction in terms of planning for and implementing music education across the four identified areas of singing and playing instruments, creating music, responding to music, and understanding music. Such a set of *national* standards, with accompanying resources that provide suggestions and guidance for planning music education in early childhood settings, would begin to rectify the current fragmentation and vagueness about music in early childhood curriculum. Nationwide music education and music education research bodies such as ASME (Australian Society for Music Education) and AARME (The Australian Association for Research in Music Education), along with Australian members of the ISME (International Society for Music Education) early childhood music education group could provide invaluable input into such national standards, as well as the development of professional development to support such materials.

Preservice Training of Early Childhood Teachers

Equally important is to address the current reduction of time devoted to music education in preservice teacher courses (Pascoe et al., 2005) so that early childhood teachers no longer feel they lack the knowledge, skills and understanding to implement quality music education in early childhood settings (Commonwealth of Australia, 1995; de Vries, 2006; Sharpe et al., 2005; Suthers, 2004). Adequate time in preservice courses, focusing on an understanding of young children's musical development, the variety of musical experiences that educators can provide for young children, and honing educators' confidence to teach music and musical skills, can only have a positive effect on the musical lives of Australia's young children. If teachers and carers are skilled in the implementation of quality music activities for young children, they are going to see the benefits of music education for young children, and when they do, they are going to want to keep on doing music with the children in their care.

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