Reporting on two National Arts Education Reviews
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Abstract
There is unprecedented attention being given to arts education in Australia notably through two National Reviews: the National Review of School Music Education and the National Review of Visual Education. Both Reviews are being undertaken by teams drawn from Universities across Australia and based at the Centre for Learning Change and Development at Murdoch University in Perth.

This Report originally presented at the “Backing Our Creativity Symposium”, held in Melbourne, focuses on presenting overview of the two Reviews considering the process and strategies used, some of the challenges and some observations about process and progress. As these Reviews are reporting to Australian Government ministers, the findings or interim findings are not discussed.

Introduction
In 2004 Dr Brendan Nelson, Minister for Education, Training and Science, announced that a review of school music education was to be undertaken. This became the National Review of School Music Education (NRSME). In 2005 Dr Nelson and his Arts counterpart, Rod Kemp, then made a joint announcement that a similar review focusing on visual education was to be held. This second review became the National Review of Education in Visual Arts, Craft, Design and Visual Communication (NRVE).

While there is some overlap in the timing of these two Reviews, at the time of the Backing Our Creativity Symposium, the Music Review is in the last stages of analysis and report writing while the Visual Education Review was moving towards the first meeting of the Steering Committee. While there are similarities in research strategies for both, it is important to note the unique nature of each Review.

It is also important to note the limitations of reporting on Reviews in progress. There are practical limits to the information that can be shared; premature conclusions are inappropriate from both a research perspective and strategically. Both Reviews are charged with reporting to Australian Government Ministers so it would be inappropriate to pre-empt or by-pass that responsibility. Therefore, in this report the focus is on setting the scene, reflecting on processes and strategies and making some observations about process and progress to date.

Background
Imagine, if you will, a blank page on which you are asked to write or draw the future for music or visual education in Australian schools K-12. What would you put on that page – if you had the power to do so? At one level that is the challenge of those who are charged with reviewing music education and visual education in Australian schools. However, the first realisation needs to be that there is never a blank, unwritten empty page. At best each Review is a palimpsest where the page is over written on top of a partially erased older manuscript in such a way that the old words can be discerned under the new. In this way, the past is inescapably part of the present and will necessarily help contextualise the future.

Why are these Reviews happening?
There is increased profile for arts education and arts and education reflecting increased attention to its value and importance both nationally and internationally. Some of this enhanced profile, such the initiatives of the Australia Council including holding the Backing Our Creativity Symposium reflect a palpable sea change after periods of relative neglect. Other important initiatives include, the MCEETYA/CMC joint statement on Education and the Arts; research sponsored by the
Australia Council (Hunter, 2005); and, the International Compendium on Arts Education Research (Bamford, 2005). Taken together these reflect a changing profile of arts education nationally that reflects significant international trends (Arts Council of England, 2005; Fiske, 1999; Holland & O'Connor, 2004; McCarthy et al., 2004; National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education, 1999). A further key factor has been the successful lobbying from specific interest groups on behalf of art forms.

There are other local factors that shape the contexts of the Reviews. CHASS, the Council on Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences, is emerging with potential for shifting the political landscape. In a number of states there is a better understanding of the essential need for partnerships that link education and the arts; while there are a number of examples, one that highlights these links is the Western Australian commitment to Creative Connections (Department of Culture and the Arts Government of Western Australia, 2005). Included in this mix is a better understanding of the role that the arts and education play in health (Harris et al., 2005; Mills & Brown, 2004), welfare (Powell & Marcow-Speiser, 2005; Smyth & Stevenson, 2003) and community building (Fineberg, 2004; Matarosso, 1997) as well as personal resilience and self-incorporation (McQueen-Thomson & Ziguras, 2002). The development of the National Education and the Arts Strategy (Australia Council for the Arts, 2003) and the establishment of NEAN - National Education and the Arts Network (Australia Council for the Arts, 2003) are also significant markers of changing attitudes to the arts and education.

In education circles, there has also been increased attention to the arts. Each of the States and Territories has curriculum policy documents that articulate a role for arts education in the learning of every student K-12. The approach taken by these documents to articulate a position about the Arts as a Learning Area has been both a strength and a source of angst amongst arts educators. The other factor that has played a part in impelling greater attention to the arts and education has been the development of overarching or essential learnings curriculum documents. For example, the Tasmanian Essential Learnings (2004) curriculum specifically identifies being arts literate as a part of communicating. This has immense significance for the place of the arts in education in that State

Similarly, international trends are important factors. The UNESCO International Appeal for the Promotion of Arts Education and Creativity (1998) and the UNESCO Regional meetings Fiji (2002), Hong Kong (2004) along with the World Summit (proposed for March 2006) are part of a ground swell of action and attention to arts education. Taken alongside seminal arts education documents such as Champions of Change (USA 2000), Critical Links (USA 2002), All Our Futures, Creative Cultural Education (UK 2000), and Gifts of the Muse (USA 2004), there is a foundation of well-researched material on which to build a vital arts and education program for all Australian students.

These Reviews are also timely. It is ten years since the Senate Report on Arts Education (Commonwealth of Australia, 1995) and the strongly critical recommendations included in that Report that spoke of spirals of neglect.

All of which leads to a need to recognise the changing nature of curriculum and education and arts practice (Wright & Pascoe, 2004). There is increased recognition that aesthetic competency is essential for participation in contemporary society (Willis, 1990); and, how the arts optimistically embrace multi-modalities is one way of harnessing the changing nature of society (Livermore, 2003).

In turn these reflect the shifting nature of our Australian and international societies with changing perspectives driven by changes in vocations, the impact of ICT (Internet and Communication Technologies) including the essential value of arts literacy in a multi-literacies context.
National Review of School Music Education

The Music Education Review was charged with focusing on:

- the current quality and status of music education in Australian schools;
- identifying examples of effective or best practice in both Australia and overseas; and
- making key recommendations, priorities and principles arising from the first two aspects.

The Research Strategy included:

- Establishing broadly consultative networks and mechanisms;
- Setting up a website for communication and collection of on-line data;
- Undertaking a review of national and international research literature;
- Mapping State and Territory curriculum and policy documents;
- Establishing bench-marks (now called guidelines) for effective practice in music education;
- A survey of approximately 500 Australian schools
- A call for submissions
- Identification of sites of outstanding practice with accompanying site visits to be reported electronically through DVD
- Analysis and synthesis of research
- Steering Committee meetings
- Consultation with group of Critical Friends
- Reporting and making recommendations.

In putting together this strategy a broadly inclusive definition of music in schools was adopted. The totality of music learning and teaching experiences and opportunities available in schools K-12. Where relevant and impacting on music in these settings, they include music beyond the walls of the school. A broad, inclusive definition of music is adopted – not limiting music to any particular genres or types and focusing on what music does rather than on what music is.

This definition enabled the Review team to employ an inclusive approach that addressed one of the key broadly held criticisms of elitism in music in schools.

The Review team was also designed to be broadly inclusive with members from Queensland, New South Wales, the Northern Territory and Western Australia. Half of the team members brought to the process identified music-specific experience and perspectives; the other members of the team had particular expertise in relation to the arts, curriculum, education and research.

Issues for the National Review of School Music Education

The work of the Review team was made more challenging because of the complex sharing of responsibility for education between States, Territories and the Australian Government. In particular, locating and accessing music curriculum policies, syllabuses and support materials was particularly difficult. The currency and coherence of these documents was an issue identified in the process of mapping curriculum. Additionally, the availability of systemic data about music education was highlighted through the process. For example, the last National Report on Australian Schooling to focus on the arts was published in 1998; State and Territory Departments of Education do not aggregate achievement and participation data for music except at year 12 level; and Independent and Catholic school systems/sectors do not gather this information.

In surveying schools and making site visits, the Review team identified a number of obstacles. The Australian Bureau of Statistics require a clearance process for survey instruments to schools; State and Territory Departments and, in some cases, Catholic Education Offices also require stringent processes in addition to standard Police Clearances. All of these factors combined to delay the processes of the Review.
One of the clearly successful factors of the research strategy was the call for submissions to the Review. The number of submissions and interest was overwhelming causing a number of pragmatic concerns for the Team in analysis and reporting. The number of submissions highlight the deep interest in music education and the success of media and communications strategies including the web page, postcards, word of mouth, industry campaigning, advertisements, and television reportage (Sunrise on Channel 7). Particularly interesting was the high interest rate from parents and community members.

The site visits provided rich sources of information about the standard, status and quality of music education. The Review of Literature revealed the extent of research literature—both Australian and overseas—that was available to support the case for music in Australian schools.

One of the most interesting parts of the Review was the development of the Guidelines for Effective Music Education. Originally conceived as a set of benchmarks for the Review processes, these developed into a useful and comprehensive picture of what effective music education would look like. There were a number of interesting challenges associated with this development: addressing both the outcomes of learning music in schools as well as the factors that enable effective music education, for example, the inputs made by school principals, leaders, teachers, parents, communities and those involved with teacher education.

**Tentative observations from the Review**

It would be no surprise to know that there are some clear themes emerging from the work of the Review. First, good music programs thrive where there is quality teaching. Secondly, effective teacher education, both pre-service and in-service professional development, is critical to the effectiveness of music in schools. To this could be added a third about the significance of leadership from Principals, School Councils and other teachers and the impact this leadership or otherwise has on quality music education outcomes.

**National Review of Visual Education**

The project objectives for the Visual Education Review overlap with the Music review but have a flavour of their own. This Review focuses on the notion of ‘visual literacy’ particularly as it relates to visual art, craft, and design. The Review is designed to:

- Survey the field of “visual literacy” research
- Analyse curriculum offerings in visual education including those in visual arts, craft and design as well as those in other Learning Areas such as English (through Media), Design & Technology
- Consider ideal or best practice in delivery of visual education
- Analyse current provision in teacher education
- Make recommendations to achieve better outcomes for visual education

Unlike the Music Review the first step for the Visual Education Review is the writing of a discussion paper that defines visual literacy and identifies examples of sound visual education practice. The purpose of the discussion paper is to scope the issues that the Review is considering, provide definitions of key concepts and encouraging comment and feedback through the interactive web site. This first step is revealing in and of itself. For example, whereas music education as it appears in schools is easily identifiable, notions of visual literacy—as a way of thinking about visual education—appear in a range of other learning or curriculum areas. We understand this to foreground the increasing role of the visual in contemporary western society.

The other research strategies, similar in many ways to those in the Music Review, are designed to produce a report that synthesizes the elements of the Review including:
- analyses of curriculum and teaching components that identifies the elements of and conditions for good visual education practice; and,
• outlines improvements that could be made to teacher education programs in visual education to improve teachers’ approaches to visual education.

A similarly diverse team drawn from four Australian Universities has been put together for this Review that reflects specific expertise, experience and a breadth of geographic locations. The working definition for the field that is currently being used is:

**Visual Education** describes education in visual communication, visual arts, craft and design. It is broadly inclusive. The term and how we currently understand it reflects multiple and emergent understandings that are driven by changing practice (including its generative nature), contemporary society and technology underpinning the visual skills for processing information including:

- Visual vocabulary
- Visual literacy
- Visual understanding
- Visual culture

Underpinning these terms is elements including, but not necessarily limited to: aesthetic understandings and artistic sensibilities; generation of visual and spatial ideas; development and application of skills, techniques and processes; responding to, reflecting on and making informed judgments; and, understanding personal, social, cultural, spiritual, historical and economic significance. Visual education engages with traditional knowledge and processes associated with different media, art, craft and design forms, 2D, 3D formats, time-based art and a wide range of genres from different times, places and cultures, as well as the multi-modalities of emerging technologies and the evolving nature of artistic practice. The work of this Review, relative to the Music Review, is very much in its early stages.

**Conclusion**

As already indicated, the findings of these Reviews are not yet available for discussion however, there are number of points that can be made about the process. We pose them as questions rather than answers as a way of reflecting the fluid nature of the field and our emergent understandings.

- Are we as arts educators needing to move beyond an apologetic stance for our field? Is it time for us to take a more confident and assertive approach?
- Is the impact of the Arts as a learning area curriculum construct fully understood? If it is not well understood (and it is now 16 years since it first appeared in the Hobart Declaration (1998) what needs to change to ensure that it is either better understood? Or changed?
- Has the cyclic curriculum swing reached an apogee? Is the context for arts education changing? In particular:
  - Is the outcomes movement on the return? To what?
  - Is the changing nature of schools/ VET/ raising post compulsory leaving age sufficiently understood?
  - Is the debate about the changing nature of education—what are we educating for—sufficiently understood?
  - How is the call for accountability to be answered? Is standardised testing a solution?
  - How are the increasing expectations of parents and society to be met?
- Is there increasing partisanship amongst arts educators? Is isolation amongst arts teachers in schools still significant? Is there room for increasing collegiality?
- Is time the issue? Or the symptom? Or the solution?
- How well are we addressing cultural, social and geographic diversity? What are the equity implications of this diversity?
- How do we keep the focus on students?
What’s changed for arts in schools since the 1995 Senate Inquiry into Arts Education? How do we break “cycles of neglect”?

Finally, in these times of change, what’s significant about the quality of arts education now? It’s clear from our fieldwork and informing research and scholarship that there are a number of key factors to be considered. These include:

- The changing and developing arts practice in the broader arts community
- The changing and developing approaches to pedagogy
- Our changing understandings about research processes and applications
- More sympathetic arts valuing research paradigms
- Accelerating and globalised information access
- A movement beyond entrenched positionings and territoriality (although there are signs that this is still an issue)
- The renewal opportunities in education that are emerging through such factors as the aging of the workforce and the “new learnings” movement.
- Increased collegial opportunities for conceptualising and debating

Overall, there is cause for optimism but also the recognition of the amount of work that yet needs to be done.

References