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## Engendering socially inclusive practices: Yet another reason why music and arts education are a critical component of the curriculum

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*By Dr Renée Crawford*

In the contemporary climate, education contexts are becoming increasingly heterogeneous and multicultural spaces. This diversity presents teachers, students and communities with exciting opportunities, but also creates complex challenges to navigate and understand. A way to think about this in the education sphere is through the lens of constructivism and inclusive pedagogy. This is driven by sociocultural theory where learning is understood to be influenced by connections between social interaction and environmental factors both past and present, such as contexts, people, actions, meanings, communities and cultural histories (Vygotsky, 1978). The construction of knowledge is impacted by active participation in real-life situations and therefore authentic learning occurs through an inquiry process where intrapersonal, interpersonal and contextual factors interact. Given the socially-inclusive practices inherent in music and the performing arts, it is being suggested that they are a critical component of any school curriculum. Educators and communities are experiencing challenges engaging culturally-diverse and in particular refugee-background students in learning and social and cultural connectedness. Music and arts education can be considered a powerful way to motivate young

people in learning and democratic life as both participants and contributors using socially inclusive practices.

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Impactful national and international research evidence suggests that there is an undeniable relationship between embedded school-based music and arts education programmes and improved cognitive, emotional and social learning outcomes for students (Brice Heath & Wolf, 2004; Deasy, 2002; Fiske, 1999; Stone, Bikson, Moini, & McArthur, 1997). Enhanced motivation, engagement and agency for young people considered “at risk” have also been identified (Bambridge, Gray, & Thorne, 2010; Donelan & O’Brien, 2008; Galton, 2008; Marsden & Thiele, 2000; O’Brien & Donelan, 2005, 2007). This has significant benefits to the community, increasing tolerance, cohesiveness, and social and cultural

connectedness (Bamford, 2006; Dreeszen, April, & Deasy, 1999; Robinson, 1999). Music and arts education can generate new opportunities for students to reach their potential and set positive personal goals, through the development of confidence, enhanced learning and social achievement (Crawford, 2017; Gould, 2005). Further, evidence also suggests that the process of arts making can aid in positively working through stress-evoking events or past trauma (Loock, Myburgh, & Poggenpoel, 2003; Seng, 1997).

The arts have been traditionally recognised for their capacity to enhance the wellbeing of individuals by providing a means of expression. This is an important consideration when working with students from diverse cultures, due to language and communication barriers. In this sense music and the arts provide a platform from which students can contribute to their community by using internal thinking processes that allow for the expression of thoughts, ideas and emotions (Okuyama, 2001). This in turn provides opportunities for social minorities or sub-cultures to support communication and expression, to sustain and reinterpret their culture or to make sense of their lived experience. Such educational opportunities can contribute to the establishment of social cohesion by bringing individuals together in a safe, supportive and neutral space, where friendships can develop and learning can flourish.

Key findings from a recent study that investigated the impact of music education on students in a

*... the impact that music and arts education can have on the*

school in Victoria, Australia, that is considered as having a high percentage of young people with a refugee background, indicated that learning music had an overall positive impact (Crawford, 2017). Results were linked to three overarching themes: Fostering a sense of wellbeing, social inclusion (a sense of belonging), and an

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enhanced engagement with learning. The creative music making process was explored in these music classes through a range of composition, performance and listening activities. The inherent socially-inclusive practices observed were embedded in a constructivist framework, which enhanced academic achievement by providing motivation and opportunities for success and growth. Personal and social development factors were fostered through the interaction with these learning activities. For further information on this research please refer to Crawford (2017) 'Creating unity through celebrating diversity: A case study that explores the impact of music education on refugee background students.'

While more research is required to better understand the impact that music and arts education can have on the wellbeing and academic achievement of young people, the Crawford (2017) study along with the persuasive body of literature, raises important questions about the ways in which education might be approached in schools. This is particularly pertinent given that many communities in Australia and around the world are becoming increasingly culturally diverse. The socially-inclusive practices that can be engendered in music and the arts reaffirms the necessity of its place in education and as a critical component of any school curriculum.

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