

NATIONAL CULTURAL POLICY

Submission by The Song Room, August 2022.

The Song Room is the only Australian education organisation delivering multi-year, multi-artform arts learning programs with student and teacher outcomes.

Our mission is that all Australian children have the opportunity to participate in the arts to enhance their education, personal development and community involvement regardless of geographical, financial or social disadvantage. This is achieved by embedding arts learning programs in primary schools and their communities, tailored to their unique needs. Over 22 years, more than 450,000 Australian students have directly participated in our sequential arts education programs, and 32,000 teachers are subscribed to its digital arts education portal, ARTS:LIVE. The Song Room is currently operating in over 220 schools in six states and territories across Australia. It employs around 100 people, most of whom work as educators and as independent artists in their own right. During COVID-19, The Song Room was a lifeline for Teaching Artists who retained their contracts with us for the duration of the pandemic during a time when their artistic careers were on hold.

The Song Room has developed a rigorous program logic underpinned by its expertise and evidence base. It delivers an integrated approach to arts education which includes curriculum aligned, sequential classroom and hybrid learning, professional learning for generalist primary school teachers in the arts and creative pedagogies, access to online Australian arts education resources via ARTS:LIVE, and community-driven art projects in schools.

The seminal research study *Bridging the Gap in School Achievement Through the Arts*¹ published in 2011, fortified The Song Room's reputation as a leading contributor to Australia's education ecosystem and a critical advocate for the arts in schools. The research provided evidence on the impact of a quality arts education for numeracy and literacy acquisition, school attendance and social and emotional wellbeing through participation in weekly classes.

The Song Room recognises that all primary school students need, and have the right to a quality, sequential and ongoing arts education.

It is essential that equal opportunities are provided for all students to participate in, and to learn about the diverse ways that artists create art and audiences respond to it.

The need to address social and educational inequities, and the wellbeing of young Australians, is essential if we intend to live in a truly prosperous society. The arts provide a powerful way to uplift, enrich and transform our communities. Arts education helps develop the full range of cognitive, emotional and social skills essential for young people to thrive. Arts learning is a critical aspect of a quality education: it promotes learning, it can increase academic performance in other subjects, it can improve school attendance, it teaches students about other cultures and their own, and stimulates creativity and critical thinking.

¹ B. Caldwell and T. Vaughan. *Bridging the Gap in School Achievement Through the Arts*. 2011. <https://www.songroom.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Bridging-the-Gap-in-School-Achievement-through-the-Arts.pdf>

All students benefit from an education that explores diversity, nurtures inclusivity, provides positive representations of culture and identity, promotes equality and equity, and increases understanding, value and recognition of cultures, histories, knowledge and differing perspectives. The arts can do all these things.

The Song Room provides the following recommendations to the Australian Government in establishing a new National Cultural Policy:

RECOMMENDATION 1:

That the National Cultural Policy include explicit recognition of the importance of quality, sequential and ongoing arts education for all Australian children, and identify quality arts education for primary school children as an immediate priority. To support this, we suggest:

- Providing support for embedding strong arts programs (via organisational partnerships and State/Federal funding and policy initiatives) for schools with low socio-educational backgrounds (ICSEA). This includes the prioritisation of investment in The Song Room's *Transformational Learning Through Creativity* program nationally.
- Connecting State and Federal Cultural and Education Ministers to address the opportunities of an integrated approach to arts education.

RECOMMENDATION 2:

That the National Cultural Policy include the provision of support and training for teachers (current and pre-service) to provide quality, sequential classroom music education. To support this, we suggest:

- Federal government investment in The Song Room's DUET teacher mentoring program nationally. DUET is a 10 week in-class mentoring program which raises the confidence and capability of generalist teachers to embed arts learning into their teaching practice, providing valuable opportunities for early, mid and late career teachers to learn 'on the job' (ie. in the classroom), and increase capacity within the teaching profession.
- Incentives for teachers to upskill as music and arts education specialists.

RECOMMENDATION 3:

That the National Cultural Policy addresses the urgent need for investment in research in arts education to inform policy and best practice. This includes reliable information about the extent of arts education taking place in Australian schools, and research which evidences the impact of the arts for students, teachers and whole school communities. Research on the efficacy of The Song Room's Program Logic, to build on the existing evidence presented in *Bridging the Gap in School Achievement Through the Arts* by Caldwell and Vaughan would be most beneficial.

RECOMMENDATION 4:

That the National Cultural Policy recognises the place of education, particularly in primary schools, as critical in introducing all Australians to the rich culture of Australia's First Nations people. To support this, we suggest:

- Providing support for First Nations led cultural programs in the arts (sequential and curriculum aligned) in Australian primary schools.

- Improving teacher training to increase the confidence and capability of primary school teachers to develop inclusive teaching practices, and increase their knowledge of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures.

Building on *Creative Australia*

Creative Australia recognised that “Everyone has the right to an arts education in school and the chance to reap the benefits it offers”. The policy included recognition of the high level of community support for the arts in a quality education, its appreciation of the international evidence on the benefits, and the importance of the foundations that education can provide in nurturing cultural appreciation and engagement.

The Song Room seeks to affirm the policy’s statement that “arts education is not only about developing the skills for a career as a creative professional. An arts-rich education that starts at school helps young people think critically and develop a strong sense of identity and high self-esteem. It also assists to develop future audiences, consumers and creators. Engagement in the arts at school also improves students’ performance in other areas of the curriculum, in particular for children who are ‘at risk’ and face other life challenges. “

We would also note that *Creative Australia* stated that “The transformative capacity of arts and creative thinking will be accessible to every child through the new national arts curriculum, which supports a new generation of creators and audiences. This universal access to the arts curriculum will strengthen Australia’s voice and develop creative thinking in every young Australian regardless of the career pathway they pursue.” However, The Song Room would argue that adoption of the arts curriculum has been hampered due to:

- Limited confidence and capability of generalist teachers to teach the arts
- Limited collaboration between State and Federal Governments to adopt a national curriculum
- Limited value placed on the arts at school leadership level
- Limited time to include arts lessons in a busy school day
- 3 years of pandemic disruption which saw schools under pressure cut arts programs and assign arts specialists to other duties.

First Nations

School is often the first place that Indigenous and non-Indigenous young people experience First Nations culture and history. This is often evidenced anecdotally in Song Room programs.

“It’s been an amazing experience because I’ve never actually got to learn my culture until now.” Song Room Student, WA.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander young people can experience disconnection from their Indigenous heritage. The arts provide valuable ways to explore their culture and builds pride and connection, in some cases for the first time in their lives.

“If we don’t learn we start fading. When I sing, I get happy. It makes me proud of my culture and proud of my colours.” Song Room Student, NSW.

The Australian Curriculum V9 draws deeper links between the Arts and First Nations Histories and Cultures curriculum areas. The Song Room supports the Curriculum’s call for *“truth-telling with greater respect for, and inclusion of, First Nations Australians histories and cultures.”*

The Song Room has, over 9 years, developed a unique model of learning in First Nations culture and the arts for Australian primary schools. Song Room programs focus on inclusive learning and teaching practices that provide Indigenous and non-Indigenous students with opportunities to experience First Nations cultural practice through the arts in their school. Its Deadly Arts program was conceived, and is led by First Nations Elders and artists in Western Sydney. Deadly Arts places local First Nations artists in schools alongside The Song Room’s experienced educators who provide support, classroom expertise and professional learning for generalist teachers. This approach enables First Nations cultural learning to take place in safe, authentic and inclusive ways in classrooms. Like all Song Room programs, Deadly Arts delivers sequential (weekly) learning which provides opportunities for students and teachers to reflect on and build their knowledge and skills over time.

“The Deadly Arts cultural teaching for students is a very important process – powerful and healing – in the school community.” Rickeeta Walley, Teaching Artists. WA.

“It’s a great privilege to be part of the Deadly Arts team. The program is a unique way to model reconciliation as we learn from each other through art, connecting and respecting Country and each other. It’s a very Australian program.” Olivia Samec, Teaching Artist. WA.

Through arts learning centred on First Nations culture and history, The Song Room is able to²:

- Develop early literacy skills
- Increase student attendance
- Instil community pride and a sense of belonging through song writing and storytelling
- Encourage parental participation in their child’s education, and build stronger school communities
- Develop local language acquisition through song writing, and link to other programs offered in remote schools

It should be noted and recognised that there is unmet demand from schools for Deadly Arts programs, particularly in Western Australia and Victoria.

A Place for Every Story

The arts provide opportunities to develop empathy by considering diverse viewpoints and the development of intercultural skills and knowledge. The Song Room works in partnership with schools to promote culturally safe teaching and learning practices. We respect, embrace and appreciate that we are all different. Diversity allows us to explore our differences in a safe, positive and nurturing

² *Transforming Indigenous Education Through the Arts*. T. Vaughan and B. Caldwell. 2017.

environment. Arts Learning at school can be important in building social inclusion and cultivating a sense of belonging in migrant and refugee communities, encouraging their social and civic participation.

The impact of the arts in education for students from migrant and refugee backgrounds was documented in a study in 2010. *“A significant outcome for those with refugee backgrounds involved in Song Room arts-based programs was the extent to which forms of cultural transfer took place. Not only were students from refugee background provided with the chance to broaden their own cultural and knowledge horizons by being introduced to and becoming skilled at new art forms, but teachers, Teaching Artists and parents also learnt new things from refugee background students about cultural traditions, values, knowledge and artistic practice.”*³

The Centrality of the Artist

Through experiences in visual arts, music, dance, drama or media arts, young people can increase their understanding of artistic values, practices, processes and techniques. They develop their creative and expressive capacities by making and responding to art.

Students participating in Song Room programs build their connections to friends, their learning environment and their school community. Through collaborative art-making projects, they develop increased feelings of school belonging and pride as valued members of the school community. Students are provided with opportunities to lead community arts projects which can build their confidence and motivation as learners, providing opportunities for them to experience success at school. At The Song Room, every effort is made to ensure that young people can be active agents in their learning through the arts, able to imagine new possibilities, reframe life stories and enact the change they want to see, rather than be passive recipients of learning pre-determined by others.

Participation in sequential arts education explicitly teaches the core competencies of social and emotional learning. This includes the intrapersonal competencies of self-awareness, self-management and responsible decision making as well as the interpersonal competencies of social awareness and relationship skills. The Song Room provides schools with a place-based, evidence-informed and curriculum-aligned sequential arts program that focuses on the explicit teaching of social and emotional skills to positively impact student learning and wellbeing and to nurture inclusive, connected and positive school communities.

This is a critical time for schools as they respond to, and recover from, the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the need for schools to access arts programs with a wellbeing focus is ongoing. In 2021, the National Mental Health Commission developed the first National Children’s Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy due to increasing rates of poor mental health in Australia. The following statistics from the strategy evidence the need for increased wellbeing supports in schools for primary aged children:

- Half of all adult mental health challenges in Australia emerge before the age of 14
- More than 50% of children experiencing mental health challenges in Australia are not receiving any professional help.

³ M. Grossman and C. Sonn, *New Moves*, Victoria University, 2010.

- Anxiety, depressive disorders and conduct disorders account for 3 of the 5 leading causes of disease burden for children aged 5 – 14 years.
- 7 out of 10 of the most common presentations to paediatricians are for mental health.
- Children who experience disadvantage are at increased risk of experiencing mental ill health

Research suggests that the *“provision of sustained social and emotional learning programs makes a significant contribution to recovery”* and that *“the practice of positive relationships and the teaching of social learning should be a key focus within all schools supporting communities post emergency.”*⁴

The role of the arts in supporting wellbeing has been understood throughout history and across cultures, resulting in the emergence of an interdisciplinary field of ‘arts for health and well-being’ in the last 60 years.⁵ Furthermore, *“there is growing evidence that active participation in the arts can enhance social connectedness, confidence, self-esteem, mood, concentration, emotional development and mental health and wellbeing.”*⁶ The Song Room has actively contributed to this research base. Independent research conducted into the impact of The Song Room’s programs showed that through participation in sequential arts learning students experienced:

- Improved social-emotional well-being outcomes - reduced depression and anxiety, enhanced self-esteem, and improved school engagement
- Higher school attendance rates - reduced absenteeism by over 65%⁷

Many Australian young people have had limited opportunities to participate in the arts during the Pandemic, either as creators or audience members. This negatively impacts skills development and opportunities to become life-long lovers of the arts. A tough economic outlook exacerbated by COVID means that families are struggling to provide for extra-curricular arts lessons, making participation at school a rare and important opportunity. If not addressed at school, the quality of artistic product, and the health of the creative economy through the development of future audiences is at risk.

Strong Institutions

The Australian Curriculum: The Arts, first launched in 2015 and recently reviewed and launched as Version 9, provides the requirements for Australian school children to develop skills in and respond to the arts across five artforms: music, drama, dance, visual and media arts. Recent revisions to the curriculum provide improvements and are encouraging, but whether the curriculum as a means to an end has resulted in increased participation in the arts in Australian schools is debatable. To our knowledge there is little data available.

Initial Teacher Education (ITE) provides limited exposure to the arts, resulting in early career teachers who lack the confidence and capability to teach and assess the arts. (Australian pre-service teachers receive around 20 hours instruction in the arts compared with their Finnish counterparts

⁴ Cahill, H., Dadvand, B., Shlezinger, K., Romei, K., Farrelly, A., & Ricerche. *Strategies for supporting student and teacher wellbeing post-emergency*. 2020.

⁵ O’Connor, P. (2020), *Replanting Creativity During Post-normal Times*. 2021. Retrieved from: https://www.teritotoi.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Replanting-Creativity-during-post-normal-times_FINAL-2021.pdf

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Vaughan, T., Caldwell, B., *Bridging the Gap in School Achievement through the Arts*, Educational Transformations. (2011)

who receive around 160 hours). Teachers are often willing, but lack the specialist training in arts education and creative pedagogical approaches to lead the arts in their school. This results in a watering down of the teaching and learning that constitutes quality arts education, and compromises the skills developed by young people.

Generalist teachers who are given the opportunity to participate in 10 weeks of in-class professional learning and mentoring with The Song Room in music education make quick and considerable gains in their confidence and skills. These programs are scalable and could significantly increase the capacity of the profession. The Song Room currently operates in 180 schools in regional and metro Victoria with semester-long programs focussed on professional learning in music and social emotional learning through the arts.

Teachers need more time to teach⁸ and this includes the arts curriculum. Alternatively, schools should be in a position to rely on a learning ecosystem which provides access to expert organisations like The Song Room to deliver quality arts education for students, and develop the skills of teachers within classroom settings.

Music is the dominant art form in education. While the benefits of music for cognitive gain are clearly evidenced, we must not forget that visual and media arts, drama and dance are equally represented in the Australian Curriculum.

School leaders need increased awareness of the value of the arts for its educational and wellbeing benefits, and ability to support strong school cultures centred on the arts. There is increased acknowledgement of the arts as a universal intervention to help create a positive, inclusive and supporting school climate, building the preconditions for optimal student learning, development and wellbeing. But most Principals are swayed only when they have the opportunity to witness the direct influence of an arts program like The Song Room's on their students' behaviour, learning acquisition and contribution to the school community.

As a valued contributor to Australia's education ecosystem, and an employer of approximately 100 Teaching Artist each year, The Song Room has a responsibility to attract and develop great teaching talent, and provide career pathways for early career teachers on the job. This includes attracting artists to the teaching profession.

Internationally recognised and independent research specifically on The Song Room's programs, shows that Arts Learning not only has intrinsic value, but when implemented with a structured, innovative and long-term approach, it can provide essential extrinsic benefits, such as improved school attendance, academic achievement across the curriculum as well as increased social and emotional well-being. In 2011, The Song Room published the seminal study: *Bridging the Gap in School Achievement Through the Arts* (Caldwell, Vaughan). There is an urgent need to update and expand the existing evidence base in Australia to provide data which can inform policy, advocate for the inclusion of the arts in a quality education, and establish best practice approaches and continuous improvement. There is also an urgent need for reliable information about the extent of

⁸ Sonnemann J., Joiner R. Making time for great teaching. Grattan Institute. 2022.

arts education taking place in Australian schools to inform policy and enable equitable delivery of programs like The Song Rooms in communities experiencing disadvantage.

“In an Australasian context, there remains very little examination of the impact of arts participation on students’ academic outcomes (Harris & Ammermann, 2015), with only one post-2008 article comparing arts participation to standardised measures of academic achievement (Vaughan & Caldwell, 2014).”⁹

Reaching the Audience

Australian students benefit from learning resources which reflect their own communities and cultures. Too often digital education resources used by Australian teachers are produced overseas. The Song Room would encourage continued investment by the Australian Government in the creation of arts learning content which reflects the diversity of Australia’s rich artistic practice. There are many arts organisations and institutions producing high quality learning resources. We would suggest that there is a need to house digital arts learning resources together to make them easier for both specialist and generalist teachers to access. ARTS:LIVE, The Song Room digital education portal houses thousands of arts learning lesson plans, resources, activities, and video learning stimulus.

In a fragmented, local digital education market, The Song Room’s approach integrates the best in digital education with classroom practice. It demonstrates best practice in arts and creative pedagogies to lift learning. Our approach has the capability to flex across multiple learning environments, and provides distinctly Australian content. Throughout COVID we have been able to provide teachers with continuous and elevated support to source and embed digital arts resources into their practice, and we are well-placed to build on this work.

The Song Room welcomes any opportunity to discuss this submission and its recommendations with the Australian Government.

This submission has been submitted on behalf of an organisation with arts components. Please attribute these words to The Song Room. We give permission for the submission to be published online under the name, The Song Room.

⁹ Social Ventures Australia. Evidence for Learning. Teaching and Learning Toolkit, 2022.