

A note from the teacher

Learning music makes children smarter, writes SUE WHITE.



While the squeaking of recorders may be enough to drive the average adult crazy, David Collins-White sees the innocuous plastic wind instrument as a tool for change.

"They're easy to clean, hard to break and, with good instruction, you can get a good-quality sound from a \$10 instrument," the creative and performing arts co-ordinator at Haberfield Public School says.

Collins-White runs the school's three choirs, three bands, string ensemble and recorder ensemble, as well as seeing every child in class at some point during the week.

The push to tune our youngsters' musical talents at school isn't new. In the early 1900s, European educators such as German composer Carl Orff looked at folk songs and began to investigate links between music and education.

"They realised it was important to the way children acquire culture, language and mathematical thinking, and for teaching children how to think abstractly," Collins-White says.

As one of the most respected names in Australian musical

education, the artistic director of the Sydney Symphony's education program, Richard Gill, says the ability of music to open the mind of a child is due largely to its abstract nature.

"Music excites the imagination," Gill says.

But while imagination has value of its own, plenty of tangible benefits flow from bringing music into schools.

"Music requires a very high order of concentration and listening," he says. "When a child hears a piece of music and wants to connect with it, to understand it, the listening level is the highest they'll ever do. That has an immediate and direct effect on how they listen to everything else, and therefore a direct impact on how they process information."

Gill became aware of the phenomenon when he began teaching music about 50 years ago. "Now neuroscientists have come in absolutely saying how extraordinary the effect of music is on the brain," he says. "They're all realising it's unbelievably potent."

An associate professor in the graduate school of education and school of music at the University of

Western Australia, Robert Faulkner, says music has a key role to play in emotional growth from in-utero development through to infancy and early childhood.

"Later in adolescence, music becomes a key regulator of mood, well-being and identity," he says.

Faulkner agrees that music education has been shown to improve children's cognitive abilities. "It supports the development of large and small motor co-ordination and temporal processing associated with things like mathematical reasoning," he says.

Back in the classroom, Collins-White believes there are clear links between music and language.

"Our language works through rhythm," he says. "English uses 6:8 time in songs such as *Hickory Dickory Dock* [known as skipping rhythm] and 2:4 timing in the walking rhythms of language like 'diddle diddle dumpling, my son John'."

Collins-White has also noticed singing can assist children learning English as a second language.

"It helps them acquire the patterns of English much quicker when they

add music on top of their ESL studies," he says. "Their language articulation improves dramatically."

Gill believes singing is the best way for children to start their musical education. "The brain loves it when you sing. It goes 'happy, happy, happy,'" he says.

Educators such as Collins-White seem more interested in boosting children's overall development through music than in discovering the next Richard Gill, however. In this field, talent is seen as a bonus; the real focus of music educators is to provide regular musical education for every child.

"It's not about being good at it," Gil says. "Every child can do this, and they should, every day."

Fact file

- Music helps children with literacy and numeracy skills.
- Start them young and begin with singing – the brain loves it.
- In adolescence, music helps regulate mood and boost a sense of well-being.