Music inspires pupils to reach higher

BY JEWEL TOPSFIELD

The gym at Dandenong South Primary is throbbing with ethiPOWER, a dance track by American recording artist will.i.am featuring teenage heart-throb Justin Bieber. ‘And ooh, I’m alive, I’m alive, I’m alive... And I’m living every second...’ chanted a new class of year 4-6 students as they worked to the beat, their muscles flexing. “Show me your robot position,” shouted Colette Maclaren, a teaching artist from The Song Room, a non-profit organisation that runs arts and music programs at disadvantaged schools. The robots flex their muscles. “From the top!” exclamates Miss Colette.

“The response from the kids was ethiPOWER cranks up again, and the children enthusiastically repeat the routine. ‘Look at the behaviour of the kids,’ whispers leading teacher Angela Savaglin. ‘A couple can be quite challenging in other lessons, but you don’t see it when you come in. The Song Room because they are so engaged.’

Eighty-six per cent of students at the school speak English as a second language. Twenty per cent of families are refugees from countries including Sudan, Afghanistan and Iraq. But right now the only language they speak is Bieber fever. The class chose ethiPOWER as their song and are absorbed in rehearsing the dance they will perform at the school concert on August 27. In 2010, an evaluation of The Song Room program by international research company Educational Transformation Foundation students who participated improved their NAPLAN reading scores by the equivalent of an extra year at school. The evaluation, conducted in 10 schools in highly-disadvantaged areas in western Sydney, also found 65 per cent less absenteeism, higher grades and increased confidence and decreased levels of depression.

The findings were stunning... I have not seen anything like it. The findings were unexpected, and I have been engaged in educational research for nearly four decades and I have not seen anything like it,” said researcher Professor Brian Caldwell.

Education Minister Bill Shorten said federal Labor was determined to tackle 65 per cent of Australian primary schools currently offering no classroom music.

“There’s a recognition that schools that are offering music do better overall. I think that’s the same for all performing arts,” he said. “Schools should be about putting children in touch with their imagination.”

Mr Shorten said the federal government would invest $1.35 million in music education programs, including $650,000 for The Song Room to help it expand its school workshop program, develop its website and provide resources for the national arts curriculum.

It had also allocated $460,000 to the Music Council of Australia for its program, which helps teachers develop song writing skills and $300,000 to complete digitisation of Australian musical scores, manuscripts and recordings for use in classrooms.

The funding is already included in the budget. Meanwhile, Dandenong South Primary year 3 student Jessica Costa (Chu) is “waaaay” looking forward to the school concert. Principal Leonie Fitzgerald says while it is too early to assess whether NAPLAN results at the school have increased as a result of The Song Room, there has been a measurable improvement in attendance among the participating year 1 to year 4 students.

“The kids show up on Thursdays (when Song Room classes are held) – they are never sick,” Ms Fitzgerald says. “They are so engaged – it is the sort of thing that makes them happy to come to school. That’s so important because if they are not here, you can’t teach them in other subject areas. There is a real flow-on effect, so it is very exciting.”

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AUGUST 17, 2013

SONG ROOM ‘It’s the sort of thing that makes them happy to come to school’

Dandenong South Primary
Students get into the music of The Song Room
Photo: Luke Gartside