

# Refugee arts program is on song

Annie Facchinetti on an arts program making a difference

**“W**ake up, Australia, or we’ll have a nation of unimaginative robots.” So said renowned Australian conductor Richard Gill when describing the state of our test-driven education system. With an increasing emphasis on literacy and numeracy results, exemplified by the Gillard government’s recently passed *Australian Education Bill* which includes aspirations for Australia to be in the top five nations worldwide for English, mathematics and science by 2025 (Garrett, 2012), you could be forgiven for thinking that arts education does not have a legitimate place in the curriculum. But a recent study of an innovative program aimed at disadvantaged students has proved just how crucial the arts can be to student learning and wellbeing.

For over a decade, The Song Room (TSR) has worked with schools in marginalised communities to give students access to quality music and creative arts experiences. The non-profit organisation now offers a variety of programs, including in-school workshops, performance events and holiday workshops, with an emphasis on developing ongoing relationships that support schools to sustain arts education in the long term. Workshops in creative and performing arts are run for a minimum of six months and are tailored to the specific needs of each school and its community.

In 2010, TSR commissioned Victoria University to conduct a research study to assess the effectiveness of its initiatives. Titled *New Moves*, the study sought to evaluate the impact of the program on refugee children in order to assess the validity of anecdotal evidence and feedback that had been accrued since it began operation. According to Project Director and Co-Chief Investigator from Victoria University, Prof Michele Grossman, a key aim of the research was “to contribute direct evidence of the voices and views of young refugee background people themselves about their experience of participating in TSR programs, and especially how they felt TSR affected, enhanced or inhibited their sense of

wellbeing, sense of belonging and engagement with learning.”

Given the high concentration of students with refugee backgrounds in TSR programs in Victoria, it was decided to focus the study on participants in metropolitan Melbourne. Six schools across the state and Catholic sectors, including some English Language Schools, were involved in the research, which obtained feedback from 55 students from refugee communities connected with Sudan, Iran, Iraq, Burma and Afghanistan. Classroom teachers, school principals, TSR Teaching Artists, parents of participating children and community leaders from relevant refugee background communities were also consulted, using community-based participatory research frameworks to guide methodology. This all-inclusive approach allowed New Moves to gather information from a variety of perspectives.

The overwhelmingly positive results of the study say as much about the ability of arts education to transcend academic achievement as they do about the success of TSR program itself. “Fun, pleasure, friendships, creative play and self-expression are not always popular indicators of engagement with learning, personal development and academic achievement in an outcome oriented, evidence-based educational policy and funding environment. Yet the findings in this study suggest that they are perhaps the most crucial elements identified by refugee background young people themselves,” the *New Moves* Executive Summary (2010) concludes.

TSR incorporates a number of strategies to actively and constructively engage students, which have not only supported and assisted the children but have also occasioned flow-on benefits to teachers and the classroom. Chief amongst these is the use of creativity as a vehicle through which students can explore and make meaning of their transitional settlement experiences in a systematic way. This is underpinned by the development of what one teacher in the study described as “a caring learning space”. The *New Moves* report



St Joseph's Kids Choir

found approaches that fostered a supportive atmosphere included, “providing fun and structured activity; valuing and respecting everyone; practising non-judgemental approaches to learning and skills development; setting clear goals and working towards them consistently; and being patient with students’ different skill levels and progress.”

While the mainstream media often peddle assimilation as the hallmark of successful immigration practices, *New Moves* noted that TSR facilitates transculturation or “the mutual transformative effects of ‘giving and taking’ across cultures for both new arrivals and the community of destination”. Students gained valuable exposure to Australian arts and customs, but within a context that respected and

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incorporated their own backgrounds. Teachers, TSR Teaching Artists and parents noticed that their knowledge of the students' cultural traditions and values was enriched as a result of their participation in the program.

The environment of cultural safety also served as a foundation on which teachers could build their understanding of individual students and their talents and interests. Students who struggled with literacy and numeracy were given the opportunity to demonstrate their abilities through the more creative medium of the arts. In many instances, students who did not have the confidence to contribute in mainstream subjects were given a voice and a sense of belonging by their participation in arts activities. As one Teaching Artist put it, "Music is a very good

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cohesive force. I find it puts everyone on the same level... straight away if you've got someone who is of a non-English speaking background, it's all of a sudden 'Hang on, we're doing a song here that nobody else understands either.'"

The confidence students developed as a result of their involvement with TSR activities also translated to the classroom. *New Moves* found that the English language opportunities offered during the sessions were critical to developing a sense of engagement with education in general. Improved learning in other subject areas was facilitated by the increased concentration and

enjoyment together with the broader language acquisition experiences fostered by TSR. A principal involved in *New Moves* remarked, "Particular groups of children or individual children can be particularly shy, painfully shy in some cases, but by actually doing things with TSR groups, it helps build their sense of confidence and to be able to learn the words to songs and then join in, and later on that confidence turns into literacy, given the right support." The relationships developed with TSR Teaching Artists and other teachers as a result of the program, were also cited by students as a

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source of inspiration to do well at school.

The use of TSR Teaching Artists had benefits for classroom teachers as well. Teachers reported that their observations of the way lessons were structured helped motivate them to incorporate arts-based learning into their own programs. Furthermore, they were able to take on board many of the strategies used by TSR Teaching Artists to encourage oral language and student participation back in the classroom. Teachers also drew on students' Song Room experiences to extend their learning into other areas.

The specific formula adopted by TSR to maximise the benefits of outside expertise may be unique to the program, but there are plenty of universal lessons to be learned from the data collected by *New Moves*. A potent example is the impact of the initiative on classroom behaviour. The use of the arts as what the report describes as, "a constructive outlet for children's energy through their emphasis on freedom of expression, creative physical movement and creating something new" proved valuable as a means to effectively manage and increase understanding of some behavioural issues. Aspects of the program such as group work and an appreciation of different learning styles were key in engaging otherwise distracted or reluctant students.

Many participants in the *New Moves* study reported that the safety of TSR provided respite for refugees from the trauma and stress of their outside lives. However, refugee students are not the only ones who could benefit from the supportive environment of effective arts education.

The Song Room provides evidence that the arts allow students to leave behind the pressures and expectations of academic subjects and put aside non-school issues through their ability to connect with people no matter what their backgrounds or circumstances. "There were no appreciable differences in the success of engaging students through TSR across cohorts in any of the schools or based on differences in gender, ethnicity, cultural background or age," Prof Grossman explains.

Another reported benefit of TSR programs was an increased sense of belonging for students. The *New Moves* report describes the story of 'Melanie', a Sudanese refugee whose difficulties with education were compounded by teasing from other students. Despite struggling with literacy, she was able to win respect and acceptance from her peers when they discovered her talent for singing and dancing. The confidence and skills that were cultivated in TSR sessions allowed her to more easily connect with her peers when she made the transition to secondary school.

The Song Room model places importance on giving students the chance to participate in performances, and this too was found to contribute to a sense of belonging. The Song Room Teaching Artists in particular noted the positive effect of praise from the community, and the camaraderie that was shared by members of performing groups such as choirs as they supported each other to face an audience. The Arts can offer a more effective avenue through which to facilitate cohesion than many traditional learning practices.

The feeling of belonging brought about by TSR participation was not only restricted to students. Performances created opportunities for children to interact with parents and the wider community, with schools electing to take part in community festivals and events. Students shared the skills and knowledge from TSR sessions with their families, forging a link between school and home that both students and parents found valuable. Students were also encouraged to share their own cultural experiences in TSR, thereby making the connection two-way.

Education in Australia is at a point where we run a real danger of focusing too minutely on a narrow definition of what school success looks like. Programs such as The Song Room demonstrate that our schools should be less about churning out dot-colourers and persuasive writers and more about meeting students at their point of need – be it academic or otherwise – to best equip them for a meaningful life beyond testing regimes.

### Further reading

Garrett, P and Gillard, J (2012) High quality education for every Australian child Joint media release. Accessed 8<sup>th</sup> January 2013 from:

<http://ministers.deewr.gov.au/gillard/high-quality-education-every-australian-child>

Gill, R (2011) Focus on national tests robs children of true learning Accessed 8<sup>th</sup> January 2013 from:

<http://richardgill.blogspot.com.au>

Grossman, M & Sonn, C (2010) *New Moves: Understanding the impacts of The Song Room programs for young people from refugee backgrounds* Victoria University

The Song Room website Accessed 8<sup>th</sup> January 2013 from: <http://www.songroom.org.au/home/introduction> **ET**

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