

The transformative power of the arts in education

By [Paul Isbel](#) ArtsHub | Saturday, March 03, 2012

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Image courtesy of The Age, Estelle Grunberg, 2006.

Who'd a thunk it? Airy-fairy arts has a spine of steel. In a landmark Australian study, the power of the arts in the classroom has been proven incontestably and irrefutably to lift test results in literacy and numeracy to the equivalent of an extra year of school. School attendance and student wellbeing, engagement and participation across the curriculum were also raised. All for an hour of music a week.

They say if something is too good to be true, it probably is, but Professor Brian Caldwell and Dr Tanya Vaughan are here to tell you that, in fact, this is all true, and not only that, thoroughly tested. Low-cost, high-grade results can come from a simple, sustained program of arts in the primary school classroom. Their book, *Transforming Education through the Arts*, is a hit in the U.S., going to No.1 in the Amazon hot new sales category for books in high schools in a matter of months of being published by Routledge.

Empirical evidence of links between the Three Rs and the arts has been recent but growing, and nearly all of it the subject of research overseas until now. In the U.S. and Canada long-term studies of large-scale groups found improvements in academic results and social attitudes in reports published in 1999 and 2002. A global compendium compiled by Professor Anne Bamford called *The Wow Factor* comparing data and case studies in over 60 countries was published in 2006, adding weight to the argument that engagement with the arts enhances learning and wellbeing in deep and diverse ways.

For the first time, the value of learning in and through the arts to the broader curriculum and wider community was fast becoming hard science. That value had a figure put to it by the accounting firm PricewaterhouseCoopers in 2010. Its analysis calculated that for every £1 invested in the Creative Partnerships program in the U.K., the country received £15.3 worth of returns in social benefits since

it started in 2002 under the guidance of Sir Ken Robinson. Presumably, anyone would like some of that action with returns like that, but not so Australia. We are yet to invest in arts-enhanced learning programs in any significant way when the louder calls are to go back to basics.

Enter The Song Room, a national not-for-profit organisation that conducts free, tailored programs in the performing arts for schools that don't have them. Its model is similar to many of those that were the subjects of research overseas, such as the UK's Creative Partnerships. Simply, and it is simple, a Teaching Artist contracted to The Song Room works in partnership with the classroom teacher at the participating school for as little as an hour a week in each class. The Song Room programs typically run from six to 18 months with school capacity building and sustainability key to its unique model.

The Song Room shifted its focus to delivering grassroots long-term programs in 2005 but had no figures to evaluate exactly how effective they had been. CEO Caroline Aebersold commissioned Caldwell's company Educational Transformations to find out whether the programs were having a real and meaningful impact, because The Song Room is only interested in sustainable effects by building the capacity in every student, and their schools, to make their own success. The Macquarie Group Foundation stumped up the money for a three-year grant and Caldwell, Vaughan and their Brisbane-based partner Dr Jessica Harris started investigating.

First came the sample. The 370 students were in Grades 5 and 6. They came from 10 schools identified as having a similar level of community socio-educational disadvantage. Four of the schools had no programs with The Song Room. They were matched with three that were new to The Song Room program in 2010 and another three that had been engaged with the programs since 2009. The beauty of the matched sets of schools was that differences in the research results could be directly attributed to their experiences or not with The Song Room programs.

The research wanted answers to four questions. The first was the biggest: what effect did participation in The Song Room program have on measurable behavioural indicators such as school attendance, dropouts, suspensions and detentions, and on academic indicators like NAPLAN and school results? A third measure, the Social-Emotional Wellbeing Survey, was designed and validated by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER). These were hard figures. There was no arguing with the numbers.

A second question wanted to differentiate between the effects on students new to The Song Room programs and those who had longer-term engagement. Another wanted to track the perceptions of the direct stakeholders in the programs: the students, their teachers and parents, and the school principals. The last wanted to identify the key elements that made The Song Room programs a success. A lot of the research was quantitative but some had to be qualitative, led by Dr Vaughan. The numbers spoke for themselves, but the people involved had a story to tell as well.

To cut to the chase, as she punched in the data and summoned up the graphs, Dr Vaughan found the results "insanely elegant." Professor Caldwell was astonished. We're talking about people who knew the overseas research chapter and verse but here they were, mesmerised. The science was solid. The implications on investment in education were profound. Poorest performers on overall measures were the schools without The Song Room coming to them. Next up were those new to The Song Room, and best were those that had got with the program early.

It's less of a question of how to divide the dollar into public and private systems, it's a question of how to drive that dollar further and to all corners of the country when you consider the impact of an hour on students' attitudes and behaviours and performance across the board, irrespective of that hour being song, dance, drama or visual arts.

That's where Caroline Aebersold slips into overdrive. The Song Room is about equity and access, she says, by providing the means to work together naturally in a positive way by celebrating diversity. In short, it's the gateway to engagement when so many have shut the door or have had the door closed on them.

Where to from here? The quality and rigour of The Song Room research is such that it needn't be tested or replicated, so now it's time for action. When you see 700,000 Australian primary school students without access to any form of specialist arts in the classroom, you see a good place to start. The Song Room reaches 40,000 students in 200 schools across Australia each year but that falls a long way short of 700,000. There's a lot more lifting to be shared.

As a former Dean of Education at the University of Melbourne where teacher training might devote a total of between two and 20 hours to the arts, Professor Caldwell sees another obvious place to go. Generalist primary teachers need more specialist training or assistance.

He cites the legendary *El Sistema* in Venezuela that has taken hundreds of thousands of children out of a life of poverty and potential crime and made them musicians. Such a program he calls "galvanising." It is also far reaching. One of those children, Gustavo Dudamel, is now the music director of the Los Angeles Philharmonic and a hero in his homeland, rightly enough, but he also inspires impoverished Latinos in California. The *El Sistema* model is now an export, to Scotland, England, Massachusetts and Syria, to name just some.

This is the ripple effect that Tanya Vaughan hopes will spread anywhere the arts is part of a rich culture of learning. She remembers one of the boys in the Educational Transformations research saying, "I stopped bullying [someone else] because of The Song Room, now that we sing together."

The arts have almost always been viewed as peripheral to learning but all the evidence says it is integral. When billions are thrown into literacy and numeracy programs that have seen Australia go backwards in the region, policymakers shaping the new national curriculum might spare a thought for a proven model that can be bought for a song.

Download a copy of The Song Room's Summary Report of the commissioned research called *Bridging the Gap in School Achievement through the Arts* [here](#)

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