

# BALLROOM *To* Move



Students taking part in the ZOVAKick program.

Queensland's primary-school students are getting more than a kick out of a new exercise program that combines dance and football, writes Michael Nagel.

**P**reliminary results from trials of a new sporting program, recently put to the test in schools in Brisbane and other regions of Queensland, have highlighted the importance of physical activity for both the body and the brain.

The ZOVAKick program combines music, dance, rhythm and football (soccer) into an active and enjoyable experience in which children move to music, learn football skills and undertake aerobic exercise. It originated as a collaboration between elite football coach Niall McCarthy and music producer James Tonkin, and is now enjoying growing success both in schools and with elite Australian footballers. "We are excited about the endless possibilities that ZOVA has to engage and excite children of all ages and sporting abilities," says McCarthy.

I first learned of ZOVAKick through my own children, who participated in the pilot program, which at their school was run at the end of the formal school day. When my children came home that day, my 12-year-old 'softballing' daughter and my 10-year-old 'footballing' son took a portable stereo outside, found some music and proceeded to try and emulate the ZOVAKick experience. My son said that he liked "learning new football moves with music". My daughter said that, despite not being a football player, "that doesn't matter because I could move to the music. It wasn't dancing, I don't think, but more a way of moving better to music." My son continues to practise the moves at home, and I am impressed with how the program motivates him.

A few months later, and purely by coincidence, I was contacted by McCarthy and Tonkin. They asked me, in my role as an associate professor at the School of

Science and Education at the University of the Sunshine Coast, to look at their pilot study and perhaps engage in further research. Having a professional interest in human development, learning and schooling, I recognised that the program had the potential to have beneficial effects on many aspects of educational endeavour, and the results of the pilot study supported this notion.

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During Term Four of 2010, the ZOVAKick pilot program was provided to 6342 south-east Queensland primary-school students aged five to 13. During the program and following its completion, feedback was collected from students, teachers and parents. Approximately 90 per cent of the students enjoyed the music and overall experience, while 80 per cent said that they would like to continue doing ZOVAKick during school time.

Teachers and principals also suggested that the program was successful and worthwhile. One teacher commented, "If you can get unmotivated Year 7 girls to move, well done. They even got puffed. Amazing!" Another said, "Kids really enjoyed it, even the kids who aren't really into sports and games. It seemed to be a lot more physically active than other games – kids were always engaged."

One of the most attractive aspects of ZOVAKick is that its use of technology allows large groups of students to engage in the program simultaneously and without direct adult assistance. Activities can be done quickly as part of a physical-education program, or simply as part of an everyday opportunity to get children moving. As Niall McCarthy explains, "We want to provide innovative experiences that children can relate to. Therefore, combining technology, music and sport is a winner."

The technology is in video form and can be played on a computer and MP3 player, so all instructions can be given in groups or individually. The program can be conducted outside, or in a school hall or gymnasium – or at home in the living room. While adults can assist with the program, the end goal is for children to be able to use it on their own whenever they desire.

The moves are embedded in the video demonstrations, which can be stopped, shown in slow motion and repeated as necessary. There are a range of video presentations, each with different levels and speeds and associated musical beats and rhythms. An adult can

direct the program or can project the video onto a large screen so that kids can watch and mimic the moves. All that is needed for large groups is a sound system of some sort, and some form of projector.

Many people are aware of the importance of exercise for the body, but often they are unaware of how the brain benefits as well. A growing number of studies tell us that exercise improves mood and attention, lowers stress and anxiety, assists in mediating hormonal changes and may

even reverse some of the effects that ageing has on the brain. In an educational context, we also know that children who do better academically, emotionally and socially throughout their school lives are provided with plenty of opportunities to explore the world through physical activity and play.

If, as a society, we are truly sincere in enhancing educational achievement, while building healthy minds and bodies, then programs such as ZOVAKick offer schools an enjoyable way to do this. They provide students with a means of attaining measures of physical fitness that will lead, as contemporary research suggests, to better results academically, emotionally and socially. ●