

Resilience building through alternative intervention: ‘STARTTS “Project Bantu Capoeira Angola”’; on the road to recovery

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Abstract

As a consequence of prolonged exposure to the high levels of cumulative trauma such as war, gross human rights violations and traumatic loss, refugee adolescents are at significant risk of developing psychological and behavioural complications. During resettlement in Australia, they are often faced with social challenges. It is vital to provide support at this vulnerable stage to reduce future setbacks. In response to the high rates of truancy, challenging behaviour in school and negative relationship with teachers and peers, Capoeira Angola programme was implemented to help them better settle in school life, build resilience, using individual strengths and kinesthetic movement for personal growth and recovery. The main aim of this qualitative evaluation was to establish efficacy and ascertain the impact attributable to the programme on psychological and social issues. Positive changes were observed by participant and teacher’s accounts, demonstrating improvements in resilience, self-esteem, interpersonal relationships and school attendance. The significance and benefits of the programme was established and was endorsed its continuation.

Keywords: Adolescent refugees, school adjustment, trauma

INTRODUCTION

As a result of exposure to the high levels of cumulative trauma such as war, traumatic loss, rape, deprivation, gross human rights violations and involuntary witnessing and/or participation in violent activities such as child soldiers, refugee adolescents are at a significant risk of developing psychological complexities and challenging behaviours (Aroche, Coello, & Momartin, 2012a, chap. 10; Fazel & Stein, 2002). Unaccompanied minors are frequently seen as low priority for resettlement and hence spend years languishing in refugee camps in precarious circumstances. Growing up in the unstable and unhealthy environment of refugee camps, young people continue to be denied secure shelter, protection from abuse, basic education and rudimentary health care. Exposure to violence has been shown to be a key risk factor for displaced refugee children, whereas stability and support in the host country have positive effects on functioning (Fazel, Reid, Panter-Brick, & Stein, 2012). Resilience among young refugees is a continuous struggle, reconciling their past and present during the challenges and stressors of resettlement in a new host country.

Those who resettle in a new country are faced with additional challenges including language barrier and

discrimination (Aroche, Coello, & Momartin, 2012b, chap. 6). During this vulnerable period, if there are no support systems in place, youngsters can be further destabilized, resulting in long-lasting complications including low confidence, antisocial behaviour, association with criminal offences and truancy. Given their traumatized past, this period could be improved by shifting their negative perspectives, offering alternatives to cultivate personal resources such as resilience for growth and recovery.

Wilson (2012) refers to resilience as a complex ongoing interaction between individuals and society which helps make sense of their world and adjust to the context of resettlement. In this process, individuals can see themselves as the agents of their own future rather than suffering from a sense of victimhood. In the traditional viewpoint, harm minimization is often the term used to describe the care provided to traumatized young refugees, highlighting

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individual deficiencies which inhibit recovery, undermining personal strengths, rather than accentuating the importance of resilience and empowerment (Ungar, 2005). Walsh (2007) suggests that trauma recovery could best be achieved by shifting to alternative approaches, employing resilience and confidence building as a capacity for healing.

Furthermore, Davies (2013) emphasizes that delaying assistance in the hope that young refugees will gradually assimilate within the community is no longer an acceptable concept. They have often endured the profound losses of familiar social network and cultural roots, resulting in a sense, what Falicov (2003) refers to as a 'sense of homelessness between two worlds', belonging to neither. Developing positive psychological growth, strength building and acquiring an aptitude for resilience can be achieved through learning, encouragement and a safe environment to flourish, thus facilitating their integration into the host society.

Similarly, Eyber (2013) discusses the notion of emic approach in facilitating services where intervention is provided with attention given to socio-cultural understanding as opposed to epic approach where western theories are utilized to reach that goal. The use of Capoeira represents an analogous theory where an alternative mode of interactive intervention is used which is an important way of enhancing resilience before challenges become unendurable (Resnick, 2005). Moreover, young refugees who spent protracted periods in refugee camps without a sense of direction, sometimes become involved in deleterious behaviour, resulting in disciplinary action, exacerbating their already complex circumstances. Hence, Capoeira is a particularly appropriate intervention due to its unique framework of resilience, empowerment, confidence building and overcoming adversity through the development of individual inner strength and group membership.

RATIONALE FOR CAPOEIRA ANGOLA PROGRAMME

Australia has received a large number of refugees and asylum seekers in the last decade (AHRC, 2012; Karlsen, 2011; UNHCR, 2017). The New South Wales Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors (STARTTS), one of the Australia's leading organizations in refugee mental health, receives approximately 3500 clients annually in need of psychological intervention and support. Almost 19% of this figure is comprised of children and adolescents. STARTTS recognized the need for a sustainable intervention as an alternative to traditional behavioural therapies. To complement standard treatments, foster healing and address interpersonal challenges faced by large numbers of adolescents, the 'STARTTS Project Bantu Capoeira Angola' program was developed in 2007 in two Sydney schools, later extending to seventeen. The overall goal of this programme was to help these adolescents settle better in their school life and feel more satisfied in their school relationships with peers and teachers.

The framework of Capoeira Angola is intertwined with the notion of resilience (Boneco, 2002; Joseph, 2012). It originates from Angolan slaves brought to Brazil during 16th century by Portuguese colonists, who developed a

diversion of fighting when they were not allowed to have weapons, through the art of dance. As the slaves had been transferred to Brazil from the Southern African nation of Angola, the art led to an 'Angolan' style of Capoeira, focusing on evasion tactics and self-defense to evade offensive attacks from slave owners. Capoeira Angola has a strong philosophical foundation of non-violence and cooperation, with participants encouraged to take responsibility for respecting each other's space (Capoeira, 2002). Capoeira Angola shares certain qualities with martial arts (Hedegard, 2012), although it has its own unique character. It is fundamentally a simulated, non-contact combat between two players which uses an amalgamation of music, singing and martial arts movements. The interaction between the participants is characterized by '*ginga*', a fluid, rocking body movement which serves as the base of all other movements. Participants manoeuvre each other into unguarded positions with controlled movements, avoiding 'strikes', through skilful awareness with the other's rhythm. Participants perform inside a circle known as a '*roda*' which is conducted by the '*Mestre*' (Master) who determines when players start and finish. Music is integral and is played by '*bateria*' (orchestra of simple traditional instruments). The movement gives young people a chance to connect with their own bodies and surroundings within a safe environment. All elements are equally crucial to Capoeira and when combined, create a unique social interaction based on the rules of respect and harmony.

Gray (2001) suggests that the absence of judgement or criticism in movement therapies is important for the survivors of human rights abuses because it puts them at peace with themselves. A key interdisciplinary concept in the practice is 'kinesthetic empathy' which facilitates experiencing compassion and kinship by observing other's movements. Kinesthetic empathy enables self-development and introspection within the adolescent when the process has been blocked or interrupted by trauma, interrelating with emotional and understanding (Reynolds & Reason, 2012).

The therapeutic use of movement and dance has been used previously to bring about therapeutic change and further emotional, cognitive, physical and social integration of the individual based on the empirically supported premise that the body, mind and spirit are interconnected (Dunphy, Mullane, & Guthrie, 2015). This is shown in the original well-known work by Levine and Frederick (1997) on somatic experiencing approach to develop body awareness to uncover the physiological roots of emotions. Prior research has demonstrated the benefits of physical movement on war-related trauma using the agricultural cycle, improving social connectedness, sense of purpose, consequently identifying needs for specialized care (Igreja, Kleijn, Dias-Lambranca, & Annemiek, 2009). Similarly, Lossing, Moore, and Zuhl (2017) explored dance movement as intervention for patients who were depressed and with dementia because of its combination of exercise, music and cognitive engagement, indicating correlation between mind and body awareness, expression and coordination. Verreault (2017) reported the benefits of dance/movement therapy for traumatised female refugees, reinforcing

bodily engagement including the use of music, props and mirroring, strengthened their resilience-based treatment model and provided a shared safe psychological space for self-expression among this vulnerable population. The model is not dissimilar to using the sense of belonging and camaraderie which is created by the process of team work, transcending culture and language as demonstrated by Prag and Vogel (2013) in a photography intervention with traumatized Thai/Burmese refugee adolescents, gaining changes in self-perception and personal strength.

The Capoeira model can be used in western as well as non-western environments or refugee settings. Capoeira is a sport/dance which does not need particular clothes/uniforms, shoes or space, therefore can be conducted in any simple and basic environment. There have been numerous refugee camps which have utilized Capoeira as intervention or therapy for refugee children living in distress in post-conflict areas. Sixsmith (2010) reported on the success of a 20 session 'Capoeira therapy group' titled Capoeira Arab with highly traumatized children in the Al-Tanf refugee camp on Syria Iraq border by a United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) team, achieving physical strength, confidence and psychological stabilization. Sixsmith (2010) added that parents expressed Capoeira had been central to the morale of the children and contributed to the emotional strength building of camp residents as they observed children's marked improvement. Similarly, a British non-profit organization, Bidna Capoeira ('We Want Capoeira'), organized Capoeira classes for Palestinian refugee children from Qalandiya refugee camp. The author reported that hundreds of children over a few years experienced the benefits of Capoeira in a distressful period in their lives and despite the less than perfect facilities in the camp's dance room, the children reported having 'fun, learn valuable life skills, and learn to control their anxiety' (Alsaleh, 2013). Capoeira was also brought to a refugee camp in Angola by United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), as an activity to promote peace, reconciliation, self-control and ease tensions among the different tribes of refugees. Despite the lack of proper rooms or clothes, youngsters had classes three times a week on modest camp grounds on what they referred to as 'red brown earth' with bear feet (Schmitt, 2016).

Aims

The qualitative evaluation aimed to:

- (1) Establish subjective efficacy of programme;
- (2) Identify perceived benefits for participants attributable to the programme;
- (3) Decrease perceived negative behaviour (truancy); increase perceived positive behaviour (resilience, self-pride) and consequently assist the youngsters to adjust and settle to school life.

Methodology for evaluation

In preparation for the programme and its evaluation, Western Sydney schools were selected based on a large number of refugee populations and their Intensive English Centre (ESL). STARTTS school liaison officers who periodically visit schools had obtained teacher testimonies

about high truancy rates, association in minor offences and frequent school suspensions as a result of un-adaptive behaviour not condoned by school community. Ground work was completed prior to the commencement of the programme, whereby principals and relevant teachers were approached, project aims described and signed. A mixed evaluation method using both quantitative and qualitative techniques was conducted, although the present paper focused on qualitative data and findings.

During evaluation, Capoeira Angola ran at two high schools in Western Sydney, within the 'Intensive English Centre' (IEC), over three school terms (9 months, with each term being 3 months, excluding 2-week term breaks in between). Thirty-two students in total participated in consecutive groups. Groups were facilitated by STARTTS Capoeira Master, Mestre Roxinho, professional Capoeirista with 37 years experience. Youngsters of each school were granted an allocated hour during school, once a week, in a designated area on school grounds to participate in group and subsequent assessment sessions. Prior to group, the youngsters had received information about Capoeira benefits and aims. Some of the youngsters volunteered themselves to participate and others were selected by teachers according to the student's needs.

Upon completion, a brief interview was set up for participants to examine 'Attribution' question. A session was also set up for participating teachers. All interviews and assessments were conducted by STARTTS senior researcher and evaluation officer.

The 'Attribution' question

Attribution theory is concerned with how individuals interpret events and how this relates to their thinking and behaviour (Lewis & Daltroy, 1990). The youngsters were interviewed within the qualitative model providing demographic information and a standard open-ended 'Attribution question': 'Have you noticed any changes in yourself since starting Capoeira?' (If yes, specify what changes).

The purpose of this qualitative question was to determine how individuals interpret the programme and whether improvement in their lives such as relationships, friendships, resilience and confidence were attributable to Capoeira. Oral responses (groups and individual) were written by the researcher and later transcribed, coded and categorized into themes.

Brief teacher interview

ESL teachers working directly with students were interviewed in a brief session to provide their opinion about the improvement of school behaviour. Their daily interaction made it possible to monitor their functioning in a range of school situations.

Qualitative outcome

Demographics

Participants ranged in age from 12 to 18 years old ($x = 15$). One school was a boys' high school whereas the other co-

educational. The participants were mainly from the regions of Middle East and Central Asia (Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan), Africa (Sudan, Somalia) and South East Asia (Burma, East Timor).

All 32 participants were refugees comprising 21 males and 11 females. Average length of resettlement in Australia prior to initial assessment was 1 year (range = 8–12 months) and majority spoke functional English ($n = 30$) with the remainder supported by bilingual teacher's aids. Thirteen non-refugee students also participated in the programme. Although this group was not comprised of refugees, they were disadvantaged youth from low socio-economic background within the community who attended the same schools. Because of the small number on non-refugees, data from this group was not utilized within the analysis. Nevertheless, the inclusion of this group that displayed similar responses to participation in the programme affirmed the potential benefits of the programme observed among the refugee youth were also beneficial for other disadvantaged young people. Benefits of such programmes have been validated in previous reports such as police boxing programmes, strengthening young minds to reduce criminal and negative behaviour within youth at risk (PCYC, 2015).

Trauma background

Prior to resettlement, four of the participants had lost one or both parents, 10 had lost a loved one as a result of human rights violations, seven spent lengthy periods in refugee camps, four had arrived in Australia as unaccompanied minors and seven had travelled with families. All participants had experienced or witnessed human rights violations, interrupted education and the lack of basic needs, which had been shown to impact on their behaviour. Presented in our previous paper, efficacy and therapeutic benefits of the intervention were assessed. Results showed an overall decrease in behavioural problems, anger and truancy, indicating improvement in interpersonal skills, confidence, respect for self and others, self-discipline and sense of responsibility, which can be extended to future relationships such as peers, family members and authority figures.

As this qualitative evaluation was based mainly on the Attribution question, baseline data included results from the quantitative teacher-rated Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (Goodman, 2001). In addition, teacher reports prior to the commencement of programme indicated several difficulties and behavioural challenges which were taken into consideration. Students at baseline were shown to experience difficulties such as cultural barriers, lack of self-esteem, unresolved trauma/grief, anger management leading to fights, poor relationships with peers and teachers, truancy, school suspension and frequent trouble with police. This was thoroughly examined in a previous quantitative study, the results of which showed an overall decrease in behavioural problems, anger and truancy, indicating improvement in interpersonal skills, confidence, respect for self and others, self-discipline and sense of responsibility, which can be extended to future relationships such as peers, family members and authority figures.

Data was thematically analyzed using QSR Nvivo 9 software (www.qsrinternational.com). Outcomes indicators were used as pre-identified codes under a category called 'achievement of objectives'. An increase in cognitive skills was not measured, as it would have required a separate assessment which was deemed beyond the scope of this evaluation.

The 'Attribution' question appeared to be an appealing part of assessment for the youngsters who enthusiastically answered, expressing their interpretation of the programme. Seven themes were extracted representing majority responses:

- (1) Increased perceived sense of resilience, coping, management;
- (2) Increased perceived sense of safety;
- (3) Increased perceived sense of belonging;
- (4) Increased respect for themselves, peers, teachers;
- (5) Reduced number of reported fights in and outside of school as reported by teachers and students themselves, class disruptions, using bad language with teachers, trouble with principal;
- (6) Increased sense of self-pride;
- (7) Decreased truancy/school suspension.

A condensed version of attribution responses is provided in Table 1, categorized into relevant themes.

FINDINGS FROM TEACHER'S BRIEF INTERVIEWS

There was an improvement in student's relationship with peers and teachers as a result of learning interpersonal skills and values such as 'respect' and 'cooperation' through the group. The teachers reported noticeable enhanced confidence, self-esteem and a sense of competence. *'Showing respect towards peers and teachers alike was a significant point of achievement for us which improved school atmosphere'*. Another noteworthy teacher quote declares: *'They've developed better resilience and social skills . . . they know how to cope with stress instead of getting into fights . . . [Mestre] has high expectations of them to act properly, to show respect . . . it's improving their relationship with teachers because they don't want to disappoint Mestre'*.

Another noteworthy quote from a teacher highlighted the importance of resilience building: *'These kids used to fight just for the sake of it . . . didn't know how to cope with anger and stress. Building up resilience nurtured their emotional strength and social skills. Once they feel stronger inside, they seem to be calmer and open to new experiences such as cooperating with school'*.

Perhaps the most notable of positive changes was an increase in self-discipline, controlled anger and disruptive behaviour, consequently improved relationships with peers and teachers. A quote by a teacher states: *'They're not the angry, disrespectful kids who were constantly getting into trouble with police. They are calmer, do not explode into angry rages and fights'*. Another teacher reported *'Anger and disruptive behaviour has been a big problem in our school . . . boys and girls were often in trouble with the*

Table 1: Brief sample of attribution themes

I love the cool movements; they give me freedom to move without hurting anyone . . . I feel like I can do anything	Resilience
I just tell myself ‘I can do this’, and I just do it	
Love the African music, it’s cool. I now the beat . . . reminds me of home	Confidence/sense of safety
No one laughs at me if I make a mistake, I have nice friends now, we all do Capoeira together	
I belong to this group, I feel special when teacher calls me out of class for group . . . others look up to me	Sense of belonging
I feel like I belong . . . I lost my family when I was young, so it’s a good feeling to belong to something . . . I am not lost	
I was always angry before, now I can control it, I don’t even get bullied any more, I can handle anything	Reduced fights and perceived anger
I don’t feel so angry, I haven’t been bothered by the principle for months (for me, that’s a big deal)	
I have friends now and we respect each other. We don’t swear at teachers any more	Respect/interpersonal relationships
I have respect for my friends . . . and myself	
I feel proud walking to Capoeira, I feel special, to all those bullies, look at me now, I am strong	Perceived self-pride
I actually like myself now, I used to hate ‘me’ before. Now going to Capoeira, I walk out with pride	
I’ve been coming to school more . . . I don’t want to miss Capoeira sessions	Truancy reduction
I behave now because I don’t want to lose Capoeira. What will Mestre think of me if I misbehave?	

principal, now things are different. They discuss things instead of swearing and fighting, which is why this programme is a huge achievement and it is something we are proud of.

Decreased school suspension was reported by teachers: *‘There were a number of very angry kids who had numerous suspensions from school and trouble with police, . . . coming to Capoeira was a turning point, . . . they got connected with other kids, calmed down, found new ways of expressing emotions other than brawling . . . they now feel like they belong to something, they have friends, polite conversations with teachers, these kids are definitely our success stories’.* Diminished truancy was also an important achievement as many youngsters would spend lengthy periods of time in shopping centres, instead of being at school. A quote pointed to the importance of resilience building, sense of competence and ability to be challenged by tasks and situations and confront adversity. *‘Before Capoeira, these kids would miss school day after day, just because they couldn’t handle pressure of school . . . it was too much to handle . . . now they are coping, they are physically and mentally strong, they have an ‘I can do it’ attitude, they have goals and they fight with daily nuisances instead of fighting each other’.*

DISCUSSION

The successful ‘STARTTS Project Bantu, Capoeira Angola’ programme has continued throughout the years with the intervention groups running in Western Sydney since its establishment in 2007. This success has been demonstrated in the expanding number beyond Western Sydney schools, extending to schools in wider New South Wales (NSW) regions who have requested the project to be implemented in their schools. At present, STARTTS Capoeira is running in 17 groups around NSW (including Western Sydney, South West Sydney, Inner Sydney, regional Wollongong, New Castle and Coffs Harbour). Moreover, nine new schools are currently in waiting list to join the Capoeira programme.

The success of this programme is multi-layered, including the fact that often for some of these youngsters, and this is their first real experience of interacting with adults outside their families, who are genuinely concerned for their wellbeing. Building rapport, trust and bonds are formed during groups with Mestre and others involved in supporting the programme which nurtures their sense of worth and belonging as individuals. The praise and positive reinforcement strategies used and teacher’s feedback are powerful tools in the establishment of confidence as well as building resilience and restoring a sense of safety to cope with stress. Capoeira Angola enhances the connection between mind and body by developing physical awareness in a controlled and safe environment.

The use of Capoeira Angola as an alternative to traditional intervention provides personal strength and self-empowerment, accounting for people’s diversity and how they express resilience within an appropriate cultural and contextual framework. Utilizing individual competencies, the youngsters were able to find meaning in a collective commitment, contributing to their own lives and a heightened sense of belonging and of camaraderie necessary to achieve a mutual goal. Despite past adversity, personal strength and resilience was developed through group efforts, making the road to recovery a more plausible ambition to attain.

As hypothesized, significant reductions in emotional and behavioural problems were observed and reported as well as an overall diminution in behavioural challenges. Upon completion, it was observed that the program had a discernible impact on peer relationships due to the increased number of new friendships. Demonstrated by direct teacher quotes, perhaps the most notable of the positive changes were a decrease in anger and disruptive behaviour, consequently improved relationships with teachers. The sense of belonging, group membership and supportive environment helped foster recovery by shifting focus from a predominantly individual pathology to individual strength for healing and resilience.

Our current findings identified further benefits of the programme which were not only constructive for current functioning and future growth, but also effective for overall school experience. The non-competitive nature of the model trained youngsters on respectful cooperation and interaction, which in turn will help in forming respectful relationships and friendships in the future.

Positive outcome can sometimes be due to external variables such as passage of time. Nevertheless, the evaluation provided sufficient and consistent evidence to suggest that the effectiveness of the program was a compilation of various aspects predominantly unique to Capoeira Angola compared to other programmes such as mentoring, distinctive blend of self-expression and communication.

In a future study, it would be thought-provoking to explore the regulatory inhibitory systems control in Capoeira Angola. Given their traumatic past and struggle with anger, it would be interesting to examine whether strengthening their inhibitory pathways and the constraining movements that would otherwise be harmful to other players can increase capacity to restrain impulsive behaviour. Being able to control their movements, respecting each other's space, and simulating fights without striking could be a significant progress in building capacity to inhibit impulsive behaviour.

Limitations

A major limitation of the study was the small sample size and the male-to-female ratio due to time and resources. Another limitation was the rate of student attrition from the programme (attrition rate = 5%). Students resigned for a variety of reasons, including moving school or transferring from IEC to mainstream curriculum. This meant that some students who were recruited at the beginning had left by the end of the year, and those who had since joined the group were not known to teachers adequately. This resulted in smaller data sample compared to the total number of participants, which consequently would not allow for an analysis using control groups. In addition, concurrent psycho-education sessions in future would be practical to explain resettlement challenges. Moreover, the control group was small, and there were 13 non-refugee students who participated in the entire programme and underwent the pre- and post-assessments. For future recommendations, we will better plan the control group, larger sample size and include in the analysis. As the non-refugee disadvantaged youth also benefited from building positive relationships at school with teachers and peers in the programme, we will in future make their participation as a formal part of our study.

CONCLUSION

Young traumatized refugees have the potential to struggle with the consequences of low resilience, and with no constructive outlet and guidance, it can lead to non-adaptive behaviours. Traditional behavioural interventions, although valuable in other settings, have not been found to be beneficial for younger groups, whereas the interactive

resilience building modality of Capoeira seems to have provided the nurture that youngsters needed. The combat yet non-hostile element of Capoeira provided an opportunity to channel aggressive energies into a positive experience, acting as a safe space for the release of non-adaptive behaviour. The structured environment together with defined boundaries, physical, moral and ethical codes, added to their sense of organization and self-discipline. Maintaining safety and dignity, the framework of Capoeira will enhance character development, strengthen coping mechanisms and resilience of refugee adolescents, enhancing social interaction, eliminating non-adaptive behaviour in adult life.

Evident from our findings, the healthy group environment taught young refugees to be resilient, providing positive examples of nurturing and functional relationships governed by mutual respect. Observing their own progress during intervention and attending regular groups, helped participants gain a sense of achievement and self-worth. The gradual success and attainments they received, cultivated positive behaviour which can be expanded to future social life in the greater community.

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Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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