Introduction

The perpetual unrest in various parts of the world has resulted in a substantial increase in the number of displaced refugees and asylum seekers. There are currently 59.5 million individuals forcibly displaced worldwide as a result of persecution, war and human rights violations. Of this figure, 19.5 million are identified as refugees and 51% are below 18 years of age. Exposure to high levels of cumulative trauma such as war, violence, traumatic loss, deprivation, threats to safety and witnessing gross human rights violations places refugee adolescents at significant risk of developing psychological complications. Interrupted education during resettlement may bring about interpersonal challenges and disruptive behaviour in the school environment. If not managed appropriately, this can lead to truancy, antisocial behaviour and mental health problems.

Capoeira Angola is an Afro-Brazilian art that shares certain obvious qualities with martial arts. It is fundamentally a simulated game between two players and uses an amalgamation of music, singing, dance, and martial arts body movements. The use of Capoeira Angola as a therapeutic intervention represents a shift from cognitive and behavioural therapies to more interactive and social methods of group therapy. It is a particularly appropriate intervention for young people from a refugee background due to its unique framework of empowerment, confidence-building and overcoming adversity through the development of individual self-discipline, inner-strength and group membership.

In 2016, STARTTTS conducted a mixed-methods evaluation of the Capoeira Angola program that it provides to high schools in South-Western Sydney (Project Bantu).

Methodology

Quantitative arm: Students and teachers completed the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) at two timepoints. Baseline data was collected early in Term 2 after the program had been running for a few weeks, with follow-up conducted late in term 4. The average time between baseline and follow-up questionnaires was 6 months for students (SD=0.5) and 5 months for teachers (SD=1.0)

There was considerable inconsistency between the baseline and follow-up sample, with some students lost to follow-up and others joining the program after the baseline assessment. Therefore, independent t-tests were conducted to provide a conservative estimate of statistical significance for a more representative sample.

Qualitative arm: A brief interview was conducted with a subset of students. This included an attribution question designed to elicit their beliefs about the impact of the program on their behaviour and well-being. Interviews were recorded, transcribed and subjected to thematic analysis.

Results

Participants: 77 students aged 11-18 years (M=14.8, SD=1.9) participated. 66% were male. They had come from 19 different countries, with the most common being Iraq (48%). The languages most frequently spoken at home were Arabic (39%) and Assyrian (20%). The study attended 3 high schools that were hosting year-long Capoeira Angola classes: Cabramatta (54.5%), Liverpool Boys (26%) and Pendle Hill (19.5%). 29% were attending Intensive English Classes (IEC). Analysis of teacher’s data was restricted to mainstream students due to changes in the teacher completing the survey at pre and post for IEC students.

Quantitative findings: Students tended to report more difficulties than teachers at baseline, with 30% in the clinical range based on self-reported Total Difficulties score, and 21% based on teacher-report. At follow-up, this had dropped to 18% for self-report and 19% for teacher-report. Figure 1 shows the average scores on the SDQ problem subscales for students and teachers (pre and post).

Qualitative findings: Students attributed a range of benefits to the program, including new friendships, improved communication skills, better relationships with peers and teachers, enhanced concentration, reduced anger and irritability, improved adaptation to change and physical benefits such as increased flexibility.

“I used to be close minded, in my own world, until I met Mestre. He taught us about people’s struggles, how to find new ways of solving problems, new attitude. I am a happier person now and I like listening to people’s ideas, I have friends”.

Conclusion

Results from both arms of the study suggest that Capoeira Angola enhances adolescents’ relationships and reduces aggressive behaviour. The combative yet non-hostile element may have provided an opportunity to channel aggressive energies into a positive experience through enhancing self-control with the fluidity of movement and musical expression. Findings are consistent with the Project’s aims to develop interpersonal skills and trust which can be extended to future relationships with peers, family members and authority figures.


“Capoeira has helped me calm down, I am not the same angry person any more, I am confident and I enjoy learning in class”.

Figure 1: Average scores on SDQ problem subscales - pre vs post

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Images of students engaged in Capoeira Angola activities.