

Out of the Box: Positive Development & Social Change Through the Arts

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I. INTRODUCTION

"...in the world of art, one can get past the usual confinements..."

-Reneé Emunah, Past-President of the National Association for Drama Therapy

From early childhood to adolescence, the arts can foster youth movements for social change through positive development. Students who experience high levels of arts enrichment show greater academic performance, enrollment in and graduation from high school and college, civic and community service, news consumption, and engagement in local politics. Moreover, participation in the arts—even as a spectator—predicts increases in civic engagement, tolerance and altruism, regardless of age, race, or education.

One of the ways in which the arts promote positive development is through opportunities for social-emotional learning. The social-emotional value of the arts is important because these needs are central to behavior, and social-emotional skill building contributes to a healthier social and learning environment.

The arts are a powerful vehicle for social-emotional learning because they have universal appeal and allow for group participation by persons of all abilities and cultures. Shared creative experiences can facilitate insight and empathy, which enable changing perceptions of self and others, social connection, and individual and collective empowerment. Furthermore, group-based arts activities can be implemented in school and recreational settings where most youth can be found.

II. CASE STUDY: BEAT THE ODDS

“Beat the Odds” is an eight-week, research-based program for youth that integrates activities from contemporary drum circles and group counseling to teach focus and listening, positive behavior, team building, positive risk taking, self-esteem, awareness of others, leadership, sense of self, expressing feelings, managing anger, managing stress, empathy, and gratitude. In the original study, upon which the program is based, a school counselor delivered weekly, 40–45-minute drumming sessions over 12 weeks to two classrooms of fifth grade students at an underserved public school, while two other classrooms served as the control group, receiving standard education only. Before and after the drumming was delivered, all four classroom teachers completed a comprehensive, standardized measure of social-emotional behavior for each student in their class. Compared to the control group, teachers reported that students who participated in the drumming program showed reduced overall problem behavior, as well as reduced specific behaviors reflective of inattention, withdrawn depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress, attention deficit/hyperactivity, oppositional defiance, and sluggish cognitive tempo. Beat the Odds simultaneously fosters student engagement in school through a music experience, while building social-emotional

skills and community—without the stigma of therapy. Individuals without musical experience can deliver it to an entire classroom of youth with mixed needs and abilities.

III. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the Beat the Odds program, the following are recommendations for how to maximize the social-emotional benefits of and youth access to arts programs, in order to promote positive development and social change:

- **Focus on the process of creative expression** and not on the product or performance. Arts experiences are a metaphor for life. Focusing on the lessons that emerge from them without expecting perfection or mastery not only enhances their social-emotional value but also reduces self-judgment and anxiety that could impede learning. In Beat the Odds, for example, drums and rhythms reflect cultural diversity. Ongoing group rhythms establish a sense of community, while they release stress and energize. Nonverbal cues and activities, such as those requiring the echoing back of what is heard, encourage focus and listening. Rhythmic activities serve as the basis for lessons on various themes. In the session on team building and positive risk taking, hand shakers are systematically passed around the circle with increasing speed until most are dropped. This is followed by a lesson on the acceptability of making mistakes in the learning process and the value of giving and receiving for self and others.
- **Include opportunities for reflection and sharing.** The process of creative expression evokes unconscious information that, when reflected upon and shared, can lead to more profound insight, deeper empathy, more meaningful dialogue, and stronger community bonds. Sharing is made even more valuable because the work of youth tends to be autobiographical in nature. In the Beat the Odds session on sense of self and awareness of others, for example, students share a favorite color, animal and food while drumming to the syllables of the words. We then discuss how we have more in common with one another than we may realize. In the session on leadership and empathy, after some students lead a rhythm from the center of the circle, others are asked to share how they think that the leaders may have felt, which segues into a discussion of empathy.
- **Target underserved upper elementary age children** due to their peer-centric developmental stage and risk of social disengagement from exposure to chronic stressors. This age group also allows for meaningful self-reflection and early intervention at a time when existing interventions begin to be less effective. Beat the Odds was implemented with low-income fifth-grade students. We have since demonstrated the benefits of this program with a special needs class. While we

believe that repeat exposure between third and fifth grades can help reinforce key lessons learned and that the program is easily adaptable and of value to other age and socioeconomic groups, these assumptions have yet to be formally assessed.

- **Serve a whole classroom at a time**, to encourage the development of positive relationships among students that do not ordinarily interact with or interact well with one another. This also prevents labeling and singling out of children as well as disruption of classrooms. After being trained in Beat the Odds, one school counselor used a single drum to give students the opportunity to share verbally as well as rhythmically. The students enjoyed the process and developed a group identity, which stopped any fighting among them because "you don't beat up a member of your group".
- **Include classroom teachers as participants.** Teachers benefit from participation through their own stress reduction, learning new tools for working with students, and observing their students in other contexts. Developing materials for teachers can help them integrate program lessons into the classroom. Beat the Odds includes a companion guide for teachers to help them reinforce program concepts in the classroom. For example, teachers use "call and response" rhythms to get student attention. Before lunch and recess, they review with their students the meaning of an affirmation, such as "I am responsible, I do the right thing" and have their students practice saying it together in rhythm.
- **Involve multiple experts in the development of any group arts program.** Involve creative arts therapists, or other kinds of mental health professionals together with arts professionals, to maximize the social-emotional benefits of the program. Beat the Odds was co-developed by a licensed clinical social worker, drum circle facilitator, and public health educator because the perspectives from each professional were needed to optimize the nature, complexity, length, balance, sequence, and flow of activities throughout the program. Collaboration enabled more thorough development of not only social-emotional lessons connected to rhythmic activities, but also guidelines for management of activities and behavior. In addition, the team approach proved invaluable in the selection of supportive language for the scripted manual and in the design of the program to maximize sustainability in school settings.
- **Evaluate your program** even as you develop it. School districts, in particular, are more inclined to adopt evidence-based programs. Measure outcomes that matter to the place you are serving and engage local university faculty or students, particularly those in public health, to help you with your evaluation. Schools and other organizations have adopted Beat the Odds, even during the school day, based on the

evidence of social-emotional benefits for youth as well as the sustainability of the program through training of school personnel for delivery.

- **Develop a scripted manual**, audiovisual materials and/or a training program, to enable others to teach themselves how to deliver your program, to encourage them to deliver it with integrity, and to enable them to replicate the findings of your evaluations. We developed three ways for people to learn how to deliver Beat the Odds: (1) a scripted manual with guidelines and accompanying CD of rhythms and affirmations; (2) a training DVD that demonstrates the delivery of each activity with children; and (3) a live, one-day training. The variety of training options is intended to accommodate differences in background experience, confidence levels, and preferred modes of learning. The availability of written and audiovisual materials also increases access to the program by those who cannot attend a training. A live training is offered because experiential learning maximizes program understanding and confidence in delivery.
- **Design the program for anyone to be able to deliver.** This will make your program sustainable, and the more people that can effectively deliver your program in a variety of settings, the greater your impact will be. In the name of sustainability, we used an elementary school counselor without any musical experience as our first deliverer of Beat the Odds. Since then, the program has been successfully delivered by mental health professionals, teachers, arts educators, performing artists, parents, college students, and others in a variety of community contexts such as elementary and middle schools, juvenile detention facilities, Boys and Girls Club settings, spiritual centers, nonprofit organizations serving youth and adults with mental illness, and residential facilities for older adults.
- **Develop public-private partnerships** in the development and evaluation of your program. Find companies that will support your need for research, supplies or space for training and help you promote your program after it is developed. Business-wise, they can do well by doing good. Most traditional funding sources are reluctant to commit resources to pilot projects. Our public-private partnerships with Remo, Inc. (which is committed to improving the human condition through drumming) and the National Association of Music Merchants Foundation have provided us with necessary resources for developing, evaluating, and disseminating our program.

IV. CONCLUSION

Group arts programs can sustainably foster positive youth development and social change when focused on the *process* of guided interaction, reflection and sharing, and when designed

for *anyone* to deliver. Building value for the arts among our youth can lead to a more civically engaged and altruistic society.

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