

STARTTS Capoeira Angola Project Bantu: Combining Alternative Therapeutic Intervention with Sport for Traumatized Young Refugees: On the Way to Recovery

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During the last decade, the world experienced an incredible increase in displaced populations; a staggering 70.8 million, which has been a direct outcome of war and human rights violations. This figure includes 25.9 million having been identified as refugees, and 51% constituting children below 18 years of age which has been documented as the highest figure in a decade [1]. As mental health professionals, we are aware that young people are exposed to cumulative trauma such as war, violence, loss, threat to safety and deprivation, placing refugee children and adolescents at significant risk of future psychological complications [2]. The interactions between the effects of exposure to trauma and the stresses involved in exile and resettlement process are complex, and have significant consequences for family relationships and their dynamics.

The New South Wales Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors (STARTTS), receives approximately 5000 clients annually in need of counselling, clinical intervention and community development programs. Since almost 19% of this figure is under the age of 18; the need for a sustainable therapeutic intervention embraced by young people has been recognized by STARTTS and refugee mental health clinics internationally. The STARTTS Capoeira Angola program has shown to be an effective intervention for traumatized young refugees attending STARTTS services, addressing specific interpersonal challenges and difficulties they face. Capoeira Angola, simulated non-contact Afro-Brazilian martial-arts, is used as a therapeutic intervention and represents a shift from cognitive and behavioural therapies to interactive

and social methods of group therapy. Adolescents with impulsive or aggressive behaviour, may not always engage or respond to traditional therapy approaches alone, but the combination of physical movement with therapeutic intent may provide a more effective method to engage young people and achieve therapeutic changes. The use of music and physical movement seems to instigate change, strengthening emotional, cognitive, physical and social integration based on the premise that the body, mind and spirit are interconnected, creating a shared psychological safe space for self-expression. In modern practice, Capoeira has been influenced by Paulo Freire's 'Pedagogy of The Oppressed' which acts to liberate, integrate and strengthen poor, marginalised and vulnerable communities through education. The model recognises the existing knowledge of students, inviting active participation in education and ownership of knowledge. The sport itself proves symbolic of the pursuit of Capoeira through dynamic involvement with its 'call and response' requiring listening and action. This is evident in 'Roda', the circle where Capoeira manifests, which is a microcosmic representation of the real world within its complex interactions, while the unique framework of Capoeira fosters empowerment, confidence-building, overcoming adversity through development of self-discipline, inner-strength and group membership, all of which make it particularly suitable for young people [3].

A key concept facilitating the promotion of compassion and kinship is "kinaesthetic empathy," which allows observing other Capoeira member's movements. In tune with each other's response in an appropriate

mirroring fashion, it complements the other's actions and responds in a symmetrical manner. The ability to intuit what others are experiencing based upon their body movements, enables self-control, strengthening the ability to empathize in sync with others and prediction of difficulties and risks, preparing themselves to better respond to the simulated threat. Reflecting on the call and response nature of the sport, it also fosters introspection and empowerment in the adolescent, the processes that have been blocked or interrupted by trauma.

Although STARTTS Capoeira is a socio-psycho-educational activity, its sport aspect and benefits are clear. Indeed, Capoeira is physically demanding, requires flexibility, strength and can be initially challenging for some but it is an effective way to build fitness over time, which is a core component of emotional wellbeing. Capoeira helps enhance the mind-body connection through bodily engagement, moving it in unfamiliar ways developing physical awareness, confidence and control. Access to components of physical wellness exists across age groups and emerges in flexibility, balance, muscular strength and endurance. The bananeira (handstand), bananeira com cabeça no chão (handstand with head on ground), A'ú (cartwheel) or cadeira (low squat) and other capoeira positions require a challenging amount of power in the arms, shoulders and legs. Its swift and complex moves, power, speed and leverage for kicks, spins and highly mobile techniques make practitioners vigorous and agile, with robust core and upper body strength. The movements inherently enhance breathing and blood flow, build flexibility, hand and eye coordination, stamina, balance and also build slow and quick twitch muscle fibres (skeletal muscle fibres producing force and motion, carrying oxygen supply). Reports from our adolescent refugee population participating in this programme indicate that with constant training and practice, the flow and transition becomes easier and less effort is required as the body adjusts to the demands of the movement, boosting endurance.

We reported in our article [4], having used the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) that there were significant transformations in positive relationships with teachers and peers, increased respect, decreased truancy and challenging behavior, suggesting that Capoeira was effective for settlement in school, improving social skills and capacities, re-directing the vigor to a more positive physical movement. We proposed that Capoeira has the potential to provide antagonistic adolescents with non-aggressive alternative approaches, reinforcing prosocial behavior. This in turn can help protect them from harm to themselves and others, avoiding complications with the law, which is aptly reflected by Mestre Roxinho's moto "*Keeping them*

Safe". Our formal assessments support this premise, indicating that Capoeira elicits a sense of belonging, camaraderie and the feeling of membership necessary to sustain the interest and tolerance of young people.

We conducted another set of evaluations during 2017-2018, replacing the SDQ, as advised by other research, it might not be an effective measure for refugees. Refining our assessment tools, we introduced the WHO-5, assessing subjective psychological well-being, which we believe is a more appropriate tool for use with refugees. We also used our *Attribution of Change* questionnaire, collecting rich qualitative data, thematically analysed, some quotes from which were: "*Capoeira taught me how to have more control, balance in my body and stability all over*"; "*Capoeira is a lot of physical work, it's hard, but it's good exercise, you don't get that from other types of sport*"; "*Capoeira is fun, it helped me learn to control my body and muscles, and I feel really cool and confident*"; and "*I learned special skills like how to improve my balance that I couldn't learn from any other game or sport at school*".

The STARTTS Capoeira movement-based therapeutic intervention is ongoing. The success of the programme is demonstrated through continuous high demand from schools around NSW to join and benefit from our service. In our experience, the programme has proven effective for traumatized young people, helping redirect their frustrations towards physical exertion and exercise. We will be further investigating the various channels through which Capoeira elicits change. It would be interesting to explore whether an additional element behind the effectiveness of Capoeira is the controlling of movements that would be otherwise harmful to the other player. It may be that inhibiting such planned movements may result in exercising and strengthening inhibitory pathways, increasing the young people's overall capacity to inhibit impulsive behaviour. Given their traumatic past, and taking into consideration their struggles with anger, being able to control and discipline the young people's movements is a significant improvement in their inhibitory pathways.

We acknowledge that young traumatized refugees have the potential to develop complex psychological impediments and in the absence of a constructive outlet and management, it may lead to anti-social and other challenging behaviour, often causing difficulties with teachers, peers and close relationships. Having highly structured environment offered by Capoeira within its defined boundaries, strong physical, moral and ethical codes can help promote adaptive prosocial behaviours and help prevent antisocial behaviour, consequently enhancing social adaptation and avoiding legal and other predicaments.

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