

An Evaluation of the Music Therapy Intervention

‘DRUMBEAT’ with Alienated Youth

In the Wheatbelt of Western Australia

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Abstract

A Before and After with Comparison group evaluation design was used to assess the relationship between participation in the social development program DRUMBEAT and levels of social isolation for a sample of sixty young people attending three schools in the Wheatbelt region of Western Australia. All participating students were assessed as having a higher than average level of alienation from the school system. Alienation and social isolation are recognized 'Risk Factors' for a range of negative health and criminal outcomes (WA Aboriginal Child Health Survey, 2005; Loxley et al, 2004, Silburn, 2002). Results from the study indicated that young people participating in the DRUMBEAT program increased their score over a range of social indicators that act to increase connection with the school community. These results are consistent with earlier evaluations of the program conducted with High School students and support the underlying program theory. Further longitudinal studies are required to assess the sustainability of the measured outcomes and their vulnerability to external factors.

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A great deal of research has gone into identifying the factors that influence a young person's interaction with drug use (Kellam, & Van Horn, 1997). These factors are commonly classified into two groups; those that increase the likelihood of problematic drug use, termed 'Risk factors' and those that reduce the risk, termed 'Protective factors'. An important goal of prevention is to change the balance between risk and protective factors so that protective factors outweigh risk factors. One of the most consistent 'Risk factors' found in drug and alcohol research is 'Alienation'; A high level of 'Alienation' from both the school environment and the broader community is a strong predictor of future drug and alcohol misuse (Resnick et al., 1997; Silburn, 2002).

The DRUMBEAT (*Discovering Relationship Using Music, Beliefs, Emotions, Attitudes & Thoughts*) program is an early intervention devised by the West Australian Drug and Alcohol treatment agency Holyoake. The program was developed in response to the difficulties that traditional interventions, based on cognitive behavioural therapy, had in engaging young people, particularly those of indigenous descent. The potential of music therapy to develop social skills has been acknowledged for some time (Skewes & Thompson, 1998). The 'DRUMBEAT' program is an attempt to combine the therapeutic potential of musical expression with basic cognitive behavioural therapy to deliver a range of social learning outcomes, including emotional control, improved relationships and increased self-esteem. Increasing social competencies is seen as a means of reducing alienation and increasing a young person's ability to form important social support networks (Christopher, Nangle & Hansen, 1993).

Two programs run in the Northern Territory have highlighted the potential of this kind of initiative. Dr Robert Smith engaged a range of boys, approximately 40% Aboriginal, and many with known behavioural issues, in a proactive music-making activity that resulted in notable improvements in both class-room cooperation and self esteem. Amongst the musical curriculum offered the drumming exercises were some of the most popular and connected closely to the participants own maleness (Smith, 2001). Smith also concluded that as well as being fun and pleasurable for the boys, these sessions also provided opportunities for students to enhance values and their behavioural and social competence. Student feedback also acknowledged their freedom within this program to express themselves without fear of embarrassment (Smith, 2001).

The DRUMBEAT program builds on the therapeutic value of musical expression by integrating themes and discussions into the program structure that raise awareness of the social factors that are critical in developing healthy relationships with others. These themes are drawn from analogies drawn between the drumming experience and everyday life and include communication, problem solving, dealing with peer pressure, individuality and self-expression, emotions and feelings, and teamwork.

The aim of the investigation detailed in this report was to determine the accuracy of the program theory which predicted that a young person's participation in the DRUMBEAT program would lead to increased levels of social competence and self worth, which in turn would reduce their level of alienation and social exclusion from the school system.

Method

Participants

Sixty students were selected by the student services managers from three government schools in the West Australian Wheatbelt. Approximately 40% of all students were of Aboriginal descent. Because of Classroom timetables the students were unable to be randomly assigned to either DRUMBEAT or the control, being allocated rather to minimise class disruption. Each DRUMBEAT and control group comprised ten students. Three students failed to complete the full 10 weeks, one due to a lengthy suspension whilst two others accepted a choice of leaving the group after the first session. Two groups were male only, whilst one was evenly mixed between the sexes, combinations mirrored in the comparison groups.

All students had a behavioural history that placed them at higher risk of a range of negative health outcomes in later life. These histories included one or more of the following:

- social isolation,
- low academic performance,
- low self esteem,
- family conflict,
- anti-social behaviour,
- sensation seeking,
- rebelliousness,
- high absenteeism,
- experimental drug use.

Measures

The evaluation used a range of data collection techniques including informal discussions with teaching staff, program staff, and participants; observation of the program activities, written questionnaires to participants, school records of behavioural incidents and attendance, and a behaviour observation scale completed by teachers.

Two of the questionnaires were specifically designed to elicit participant feedback on the program; one given at the half-way stage (session five) which focused on participant understanding of the goals of the program and the performance of the facilitators; and the other given at the completion of the program (session ten) which looked at participants perceptions of their own learning, as well as their enjoyment of the program itself.

The Rosenberg Self Esteem scale, a ten item Likert scale, was given to each group prior to the commencement of the ten week program period and immediately after its completion. The wording of this questionnaire was altered slightly to make it more readily understandable to the chosen age group. The behavioural observation scale asked for teacher feedback on change over the ten week period across a range of behavioural areas including their relationships with their peers, their relationships with other adults and teachers, their level of emotional control, their level of participation in group activities and their feelings of self-worth. These were necessarily subjective judgments made by teachers who had the most interaction with the students. The scale was rated one to ten with five indicating no change, ten – highly positive change and one – highly detrimental change.

Procedure

A meeting was held with each of the managers of student services for the three schools. At this meeting the goals of the program and the requirements of the evaluation were discussed. To minimise class disruption and avoid unnecessary stigmatism, twenty students were chosen from each school, within the same year group. Ten of these would come from one class and form the DRUMBEAT intervention group while the other ten would come from a different class and form the comparison group. Each student was chosen because of a recognized history of 'risk factors', though students themselves were misled into believing they had been drawn from a hat into one of several options which included drumming, sewing, cooking, dancing and computing.

Both DRUMBEAT students and those in the comparison group were given the Rosenberg self-esteem scale at the commencement of the first session. Facilitators were on hand to explain the questions when doubts about their meaning arose. During session five, the first questionnaire was given to DRUMBEAT participants to gauge feedback on the way the program was being delivered. At this stage also a meeting was held with classroom teachers of both groups to introduce them to the demands of the behavioural scale they would complete at the end of the ten sessions.

At the completion of week ten (the 10th session) participants from both groups were once again given the Rosenberg self-esteem scale and those participating in the DRUMBEAT program were given the second questionnaire whose focus was on their perception of their own progress during the ten sessions, as well as their overall satisfaction with the program. Certificates of completion were also given to those who

had completed the DRUMBEAT program. The teacher behaviour observation scale was also given out at this stage.

In the week following the completion of the program a separate meeting was held with each of the student services managers to gauge their impression of the program and to recover school records of attendance, behavioural incidents, and suspensions for each student over the period of the intervention as well as the preceding ten weeks. Individual meetings were also held with teachers and school principals to obtain qualitative feedback. This was particularly important for insight into behaviours that would not be severe enough to appear through standard recording arrangements. Finally interviews were held with participating facilitators to ascertain their perceptions on both the delivery of the program itself and group dynamics throughout the life of each group.

Results

The results have been categorized into four areas each relating to participants social development and with implications as to their ability to integrate themselves into the school system and society in general. These areas include levels of self-esteem, levels of school attendance, levels of anti-social behaviour, and levels of cooperation and collaboration. A final area of inquiry related to participant satisfaction with the DRUMBEAT program.

Levels of self-esteem were measured as group averages and results from the pre and post self-esteem scale show a mean increase in self-esteem across the three groups participating in DRUMBEAT of sixteen percent, with those of the comparison groups falling seven percent. The increase for DRUMBEAT students took their scores from the low range to average, whilst the comparison remained within boundary of average self-

esteem. Teacher feedback indicated that 77% of DRUMBEAT participants had improved their feeling of self-worth whilst participant feedback also supported increased levels of confidence and recognition of achievement.

Levels of attendance were again measured as group averages. For DRUMBEAT participants the average half day absence rate dropped from thirteen over the ten weeks prior to the program to eight over the course of the intervention, whilst the comparison remained steady at six. At one school this led to an increase in attendance of 80 half days for ten high risk students over a period of ten weeks (four extra school days per child).

Levels of anti-social behaviour were measured by consulting school behavioural incident records as well as teacher and facilitator feedback. School behavioural records were statistically insignificant, as given the age-group, only major breaches of discipline would result in suspension. Qualitative feedback noted that the number of classroom behavioural incidents warranting teacher intervention had fallen significantly although certain individual students continued to exhibit strong defiance towards teacher authority, bullying and other aggressive behaviours.

Increases in levels of cooperation were measured through the teacher behaviour scale and indicated that sixteen of the twenty seven (60%) DRUMBEAT participants had increased their scores in this area compared to eleven of the thirty (40%) comparison group members. Participants themselves recorded a strong positive response to participation in the drumming group and feedback from teacher interviews pointed to significant improvements in individual students, particularly those who had previously been shy or withdrawn.

The participants overwhelmingly enjoyed the DRUMBEAT program, with 26 of the 27 indicating they would highly recommend it to others. Although a small number of students failed to complete the program this was not deemed unusual given the chosen demographic and the voluntary nature of attendance. There were a number of findings related to the conduct of the program which included: positive feedback on the role of the presenters and the inclusiveness of their facilitation; high participant awareness of the goals of the program, and their progress towards those goals; positive feedback on the involvement of an indigenous presenter as a positive role model for participants, and to broaden the cultural relevance of relationship issues during discussions; confidence in being able to talk freely within the group.

Discussions

The findings of this evaluation replicate those of an earlier formative evaluation into the potential of the DRUMBEAT program in a High School setting (Faulkner, 2004), and support previous research that has demonstrated the potential of music to engage young people who are at risk of alienation from mainstream society, (Smith, 2001).

Several limitations exist within the methodology of the study, including the non-random assignment of participants. It was evident from the results, that those participants allocated to the DRUMBEAT program had stronger histories of anti-social behaviour and lower self-esteem at the start of the program than members of the comparison group despite efforts to make the groups as similar as possible. In addition there is always the potential for external variables, beyond the control of the researchers, to influence change.

Despite these limitations it is clear that the program engages a group, notoriously difficult to engage and does so in a way that transfers learning that can be of benefit in reducing their alienation. As well as positively engaging them in a pro-social activity, participants have increased their capacities in a range of social skills, as well as their feelings of self-worth. These positive changes have the potential to build a level of resilience within those young people who attended the program, reconnecting them with the school community and protecting them from the harms associated with social isolation.

The implication of increased attendance is also a favourable one, having been identified as a strong predictor of social health (Resnick et al, 1997). Detachment from school, poor academic performance and an unsupportive or rigid school culture are all predictors of increased risk of criminality and substance misuse (National Crime Prevention, 1999). The DRUMBEAT program has overwhelming participant endorsement, engaging young people quickly through the medium of music and in a non-threatening manner that differs markedly from many other cognitive behavioural interventions; designed with indigenous youth in mind, and recognising the difficulties traditional interventions have with the cultural differences surrounding communication and learning in Aboriginal society.

In keeping with findings from the recently completed Western Australian Aboriginal Child Health Survey (2003), the program provides opportunities for the development of several key components of optimal child development, including self-efficacy, and the regulation of emotions, and reduces one of the key barriers to social and emotional well being – namely social exclusion.

This study demonstrates the potential of the DRUMBEAT program as an early intervention, to provide a means of stemming a young person's alienation from the school community; an opportunity for re-engaging them by providing them with a range of skills that may enable them to establish better relationships with those around them. The program also offers opportunities for pro-social activity combined with rewards for pro-social involvement, including recognition of achievement, a factor missing from many other targeted interventions which run the risk of stigmatising their participants.

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