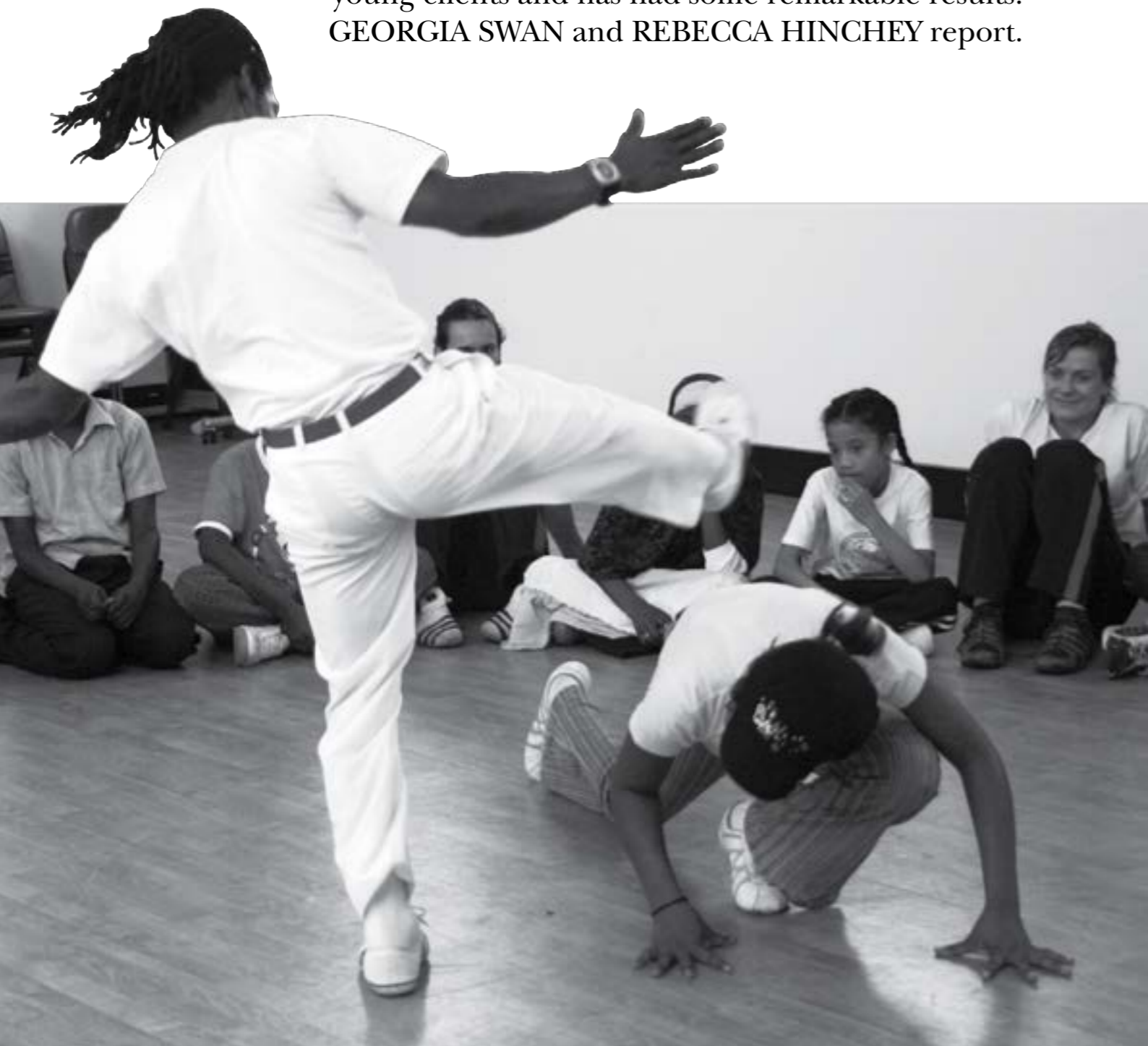


Capoeira Angola

HEALING IN ACTION

A form of psychosocial intervention based on dance and martial arts is being used by STARTTS with young clients and has had some remarkable results. GEORGIA SWAN and REBECCA HINCHEY report.



To arrive in Australia, Capoeira Angola travelled from Africa to Brazil, enduring countless years of brutal oppression and enslavement before landing in the lucky country.

A martial art, dance, and musical performance, Capoeira Angola's journey to Australia mirrors the roads trodden by refugee children. "The symbolism is not lost," says the program's leader Maestre Roxinho: "It is fitting that the game used by Afro-Brazilians to resist oppression and slavery is helping refugees build a new life."

Twenty-six young people from Africa, South East Asia and the Middle East have taken part in the successful trial of this innovative approach, in a partnership between the NSW Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors (STARTTS), Project Bantu Capoeira Angola and the Cabramatta Intensive English Centre (IEC).

Capoeira Angola is a mock combat between two people which takes place in a circle formed by the other players, known as the Roda. It is strictly non-contact; players manoeuvre with skill and awareness. Together, they seek to combine their attack and defence movements, aiming to connect their game together as one.

Music is integral to the game, with the young people taking part in a call and response song using the Portuguese language. Participants play in turn one

of the eight instruments that form the orchestra, helping keep the constant rhythm of the game.

Before coming to the program, many of the students were suffering from a range of post-traumatic difficulties. When combined with settlement issues and the normal ups and downs of adolescent life, these problems were resulting in inappropriate and challenging behaviours at school.

Evaluation of Project Bantu has found that by incorporating aspects of dance, music and group intervention, Capoeira Angola is contributing to the development of healthy communication skills, enhancing confidence and self-esteem and assisting young refugees to learn self-discipline and control.

The Principal of Cabramatta High School, Beth Godwin, describes the impact of a program like this, "Students began to smile and have respect for themselves and each other. They began to pay attention to each other's needs. If you can get teenagers to do this, you're going to have great adults."

For young people, it is so often simply about fitting in at school. They are lonely, don't know how to make friends and are teased for their differences.

That's how it was for Mary*, "Before, when I came to IEC it was so hard and I didn't even know how to say hi."

After Project Bantu she sounds happy and self-confident. "Capoeira helped me

so much just to feel good. I felt good and like I could make friends," she says.

STARTTS's community development worker involved in Capoeira Angola, Jeannie O'Carroll, explains how often Capoeira Angola mirrors what happens in life.

"It has physical, moral and ethical codes which the players are required to follow and respect," Jeannie says.

"The interaction between the musical and physical elements is a micro-representation of the community. It mimics life's interactions.

"But it's a safe environment. In that safe container young people can rehearse the skills they need to succeed at school and at home," she emphasizes.

Those skills include respecting rules, learning from mistakes, managing bad feelings, responding to bullying, respecting yourself and others, belonging to a group and developing self-awareness and expression.

For 15-year-old Iraqi-born Yasmine it helped to deal with the arguments at home that no longer involve her.

"Capoeira also helped me with my family fighting because it teaches you not to shout and be angry. My family fights a lot and now I don't even shout with them anymore. I think they need Capoeira too."

For other kids, like 16-year-old Mohammed, it's about building self-esteem and confidence. "Sometimes I get scared a little bit in the beginning of



playing but then I like showing everyone that I can do it. It makes me feel good inside when I can do it."

Thinking about what these kids have been through before reaching this program is truly upsetting. Born in war, they've grown up in refugee camps. They've witnessed violence of the worst kind. Parents have gone missing, been killed or raped, often in front of their eyes. They've lost their homeland, their culture and their friends.

Exposure to such extreme trauma is almost bound to cause emotional, social and developmental difficulties for refugee kids. Teenage years are fraught with challenges at the best of times, but for refugees the trauma they have experienced is compounded by the problems they face with communicating in an unfamiliar language and learning a new set of rules about how to behave.

Young people however are incredibly resilient and have great capacity to recover if they can access appropriate support and opportunities to learn and grow.

Describing why STARTTS chose Capoeira Angola, Coordinator of Community Services, Jasmina Bajraktarevic Hayward, said that it was particularly relevant to the needs, strengths and diversity of young people.

"It's about empowerment and overcoming adversity, developing individual strengths while being a member of the group," Jasmina says.

"It's fun, it uses lots of energy and it helps the young ones to express their frustration and aggression in a constructive way."

As 17-year-old Raymond* from Burundi explains, "I love all the time we are in the classroom playing Capoeira. I feel good, like not angry ever."

Everyone agrees that relationships are the central element that makes Capoeira Angola such an effective program.

"It's modelled really good relationships and interaction with the kids and with each other. That is very powerful, for the kids to see a different way of doing things," explains Elisabeth Pickering, Cabramatta IEC Counsellor.

Maestre Roxiho says, "The core principle of Capoeira Angola is respect."

"I started Project Bantu with at-risk kids in Brazilian slums, with kids who did not respect other people, teachers or parents. I started in a playful way. What they learned in the class, little by little was brought out in their everyday life. They started to respect the rest of society as well," he says.

"Keeping Capoeira Angola in its original traditional form is essential for its success."

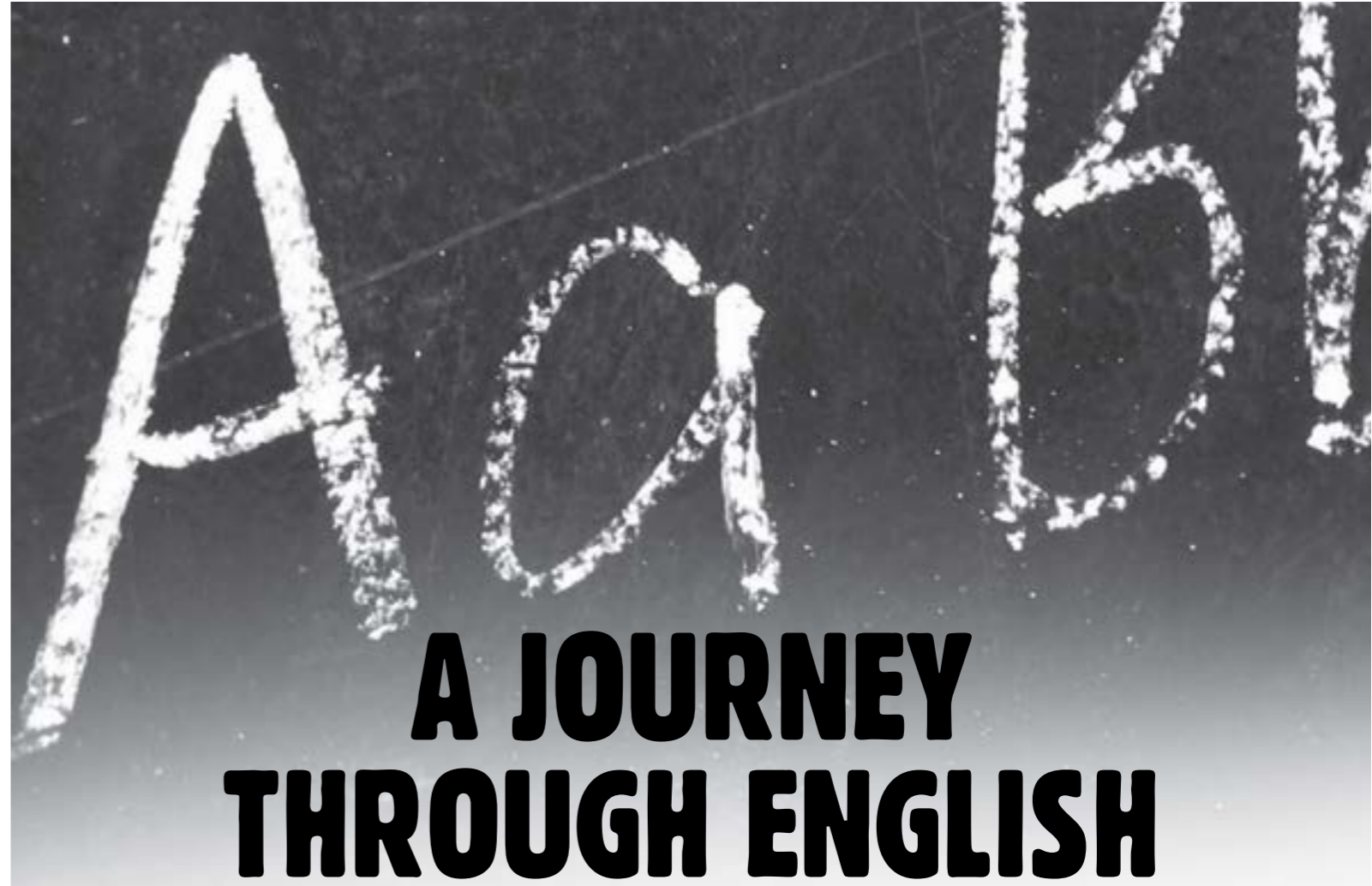
Mohammed* puts it like this: "Other teachers are always shouting at me and are so bossy. In Capoeira the teachers are talking nice to me. I hate it when the teachers shout at me. It makes me feel angry and bad. But when the Capoeira teachers are always so nice to me it makes me feel good."

Amy* has learnt basic relationship skills. "It taught me about helping people. Everyone has to help each other," she says.

Summing up the feeling of the Capoeira Angola students 16-year-old Maria says, "It makes me feel happy. When I come here it is like a different world to me. I don't care what happens outside. Like if I have bad days, when I come here I'm happy, It is like a big family here." ■

*Names have been changed to protect the identities of the young people.

For more information about Capoeira Angola at STARTTS call 02 9794 1900 or visit www.startts.org.au
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tccQxDDyC0M>
www.capoeiraangola-projectbantu.com.au



A JOURNEY THROUGH ENGLISH

Since 2000, volunteer English teachers have provided classes at STARTTS for men and women from refugee backgrounds who have not been able to gain access to the classes through other formal channels ELIZABETH SCHAFFER speaks with some of the teachers and students.

The English classes began as part of STARTTS' response to an urgent need that arose when legislation was introduced to bar people with Temporary Protection Visas (TPVs) from free English tuition.

"They were in culture shock", says Sister Maureen O'Connor, who has been a volunteer at STARTTS for many years. "People were very traumatised. In a way they had experienced trauma all their lives. Many of the students were pre-literate. They were on TPVs, they had no English, and had been in detention. At STARTTS they were greeted and welcomed and treated with dignity."

It was clear to the teachers that a flexible, student-centered approach was needed in the classes. "All the teachers used to bring morning tea to share with their classes and they gave the students time. It was hard for

people to learn, their memories were affected. They had post-trauma symptoms. They were so broken when they first started coming to the classes. It's terrible to think of the TPV ever being introduced again. It caused so much suffering".

The English classes that were started for the men on TPVs were not, Maureen says, conventional English classes. "That's not what people needed. I remember a teacher who came into class intending to volunteer. She wanted an 'outcomes program' but we couldn't teach in that way, topic to topic, it just didn't work. I rang a prominent refugee advocate who told me 'These are adults; they have a life experience to tap into'. And that's how we taught; we touched their life situations. We were on a journey together, we celebrated as someone became a citizen and when there