



# CAPOEIRA – COUNSELLING IN MOTION

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*STARTTS' program of Capoeira Angola provides training in many areas that are important for young refugees. This ancient art form is a mix of dance and martial arts, with a rich cultural heritage stretching back more than 400 years to the brutal enslavement of Africans in Brazil. Recently, three participants in the program from Cabramatta High School travelled to New Zealand for an international event. RICHARD WALKER spoke to Capoeira Project Officers at STARTTS, MESTRE ROXINHO and CHIARA RIDOLFI, and Cabramatta High School Student Counsellor, ELIZABETH PICKERING about the benefits of the program.*

**How do you feel about the Capoeira program at Cabramatta Intensive English Centre?**

**EP:** It has been amazing to see the growth in the kids and the way the program has developed. We started off four years ago with a diverse group of kids from African backgrounds. They had had really traumatic lives and had been in refugee camps for a long time so they weren't very well socialised. Over the years I have seen a dramatic change in the way they relate to each other. They are now much more connected and helpful. At the beginning I would be tearing my hair out because it was really difficult to get them to co-operate and respect others. There was potential for their skills to be good but they were not focused.

I think just sticking with the kids, listening, supporting, mentoring and teaching them was good. They have had a remarkable transformation. The skills they have learnt have really blossomed.

**How did it start here at Cabramatta High?**

**EP:** STARTTS approached us about running a group. I have worked in this high school for 21 years and I have had a lot of involvement with STARTTS so I was really keen to see kids of African backgrounds getting a program with some therapeutic benefits. I think the traditional ways of Western counselling – sitting down and talking – is not the way to really get the long-term changes. Capoeira's roots are in Africa. It was the way people, who were taken from African countries to Brazil, kept their cultural heritage and practice going, and it was the way they found support and friendship with each other. I think the concept really appealed to me.

**What do you think it is about the medium of Capoeira that brings about that change?**

**EP:** It is a really complex set of factors. For these kids it is the physicality of it, the way you



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participate and belong to a group. It is a sense of identity. It is the connection, a really powerful way to develop trust.

When you're swinging your legs over someone else's head and they're swinging their legs over your head you need to have a certain amount of trust that they are not going to kick you in the head! So Capoeira is built on trust and co-operation, respect for each other and respect for yourself. So I think those sorts of things have been really good in promoting those values and concepts with the kids.

**How do you think the program has grown and changed in the last couple of years?**

**MR:** The program has evolved and now focuses on two aspects, self-esteem and confidence, which are a priority for kids who have survived trauma and settled in the Australian environment, but it also gives opportunities for leadership. It has been amazing the connections that we have made with the kids and their families. The mothers know I look after them. They know us. This is a big change.

**It seems like there is a real historical lineage to it, that has continued in the program and is happening now – it's quite remarkable in many ways.**

**EP:** Yes it is. I think it has been the best program ever for refugee students because it has been long-term and conducted by someone who has the cultural background and the connections to be able to identify with the kids and teach things in a way that fits with their cultural practice. That has made it very effective.

We have done other activities with young people. We have had two camps over the last two years that have been good at providing other opportunities to socialise and enjoy the connection we have made as a group. I think that has helped as well. I think trainers' competence and their ability to relate to young people have also made it successful.

**Obviously those kinds of skills that they're showing in the class have been transferred to their lives outside of class as well.**

**EP:** That's right, yes. And, in fact, we've been doing a bit of monitoring of the indicators of engagement at school. All the Capoeira kids were often in trouble at school. They had detentions. Some were suspended. Their attendance would often be poor. But no one has been suspended this year and attendance is better than it has ever been. And their leadership skills are just blossoming in other areas.

We have now got five students who have been to Capoeira that are on the Students Representative Council (SRC). This is the first time that we've had any kid of African background on the SRC and we have also got Capoeira kids being peer leaders.

So they are giving back. It has never been like that before. I think that the turnabout is wonderful. That is exactly what we want. In any healing process, if the people who have been given the help become the helpers, it shows that they have been able to move on.

Every day that I am here I see lovely responses from the kids in terms of the bonds that we have



developed and their willingness to talk about things that would never have been talked about before. It has a long-term effect, which pays off, and I guess for everyone, being there for the long haul makes a difference.

**I've only ever seen Capoeira from a distance, and I don't think I fully understand how it works.**

**MR:** It's a little bit complicated! It's a lifelong learning. It takes a while for you to understand, to see yourself doing the movements – you get frustrated.

It is quite a big challenge for anyone, even for the person teaching there are a lot of challenges involved in achieving emotional control. All the time you are being tested. You have to have your own control. It's very powerful.

**It's interesting to me that Capoeira is a program that is**

**based around dance and martial arts, and yet it seems to have all these other benefits for people who do it. So what are the benefits that you've seen in the kids over the years, and what is it about Capoeira that allows that to happen?**

**CR:** I think Capoeira is one tool, and what is good is that you can do it from a physical point of view, or you can put Capoeira Angola in a context – the cultural context, the historical context – and take all these contexts together with the body movements in the classroom. And then you have what you normally have in any other popular cultural practice: knowledge that doesn't involve only that small movement but a knowledge that involves how you should behave with adults or with your peers, what is the appropriate behaviour on certain occasions and what isn't in others.

There is knowledge in the music,

the culture, the history and for these kids it resonates. They were part of a cultural context where all this knowledge was passed through non-verbal activities – certainly in Africa but as well in other places – so it resonates because Capoeira is a continuation of those contexts. It has been taken from a different cultural context but it still carries the same way of giving knowledge, and I think that is why it is beneficial.

**MR:** I guess that maybe the kids never did anything cultural back home because some of them were born in refugee camps. However their culture is in their blood. It comes from their heritage. While they may never have done anything cultural their grandmother did.

The connection to their culture makes a huge difference for them, and this is an aspect everyone needs to look at when working with people with trauma issues. We often just look at it one way.

**“They were part of a cultural context where all this knowledge was passed through non-verbal activities – certainly in Africa...”**

We don't look at it in other ways. Those students we assist need to connect with their culture because it nurtures them. Capoeira is an Afro-Brazilian art form so it is connected to their culture and it makes them proud to do it. Also, students develop skills that are recognised by people. They could even make a living from it in the future. And instead of me or Chiara going to their community to teach it, they could teach it to their own people.

**So it's also like community development because it's empowering them to empower their own communities.**

**CR:** And to learn how to be with other communities as well. For example, some students are assisting us on the program right now. They are Sudanese. We don't just get them to come and run the program in the Sudanese community but also in the Iraqi community.

That is important because although they need to run this program with their own people, they have the right and the power to do so with other communities as well. And I think that is going to challenge the views they have about themselves: “Oh, I'm black. Iraqis are different, these people are Asian.”

I think that this program has the power to change perceptions and views, at least in the small scale. I would like in the future for an Iraqi person to tell me, “I had a woman from Africa teach me Capoeira Angola”, and I think that is much more powerful than just working with the Sudanese community.

**What happened at the conference and why was it important?**

**MR:** It was important because it was the first time those kids had gone out of Australia and seen something different. It was great because there was no structure that said you have to do this, or that. They just had to adjust to be inside the marae (Maori communal or sacred place).

They discovered how big Capoeira is worldwide. So I guess it opened their minds. They had to communicate with others and see how they were playing Capoeira and how they were growing in the program. They learned a lot of skills and saw that people were committed to it and realised they could be committed as well.

And, afterwards I could see the students were more focussed, more disciplined, and more responsible in the program. It helped them in so many ways.

These students are now becoming teachers of Capoeira to the other kids. In New Zealand when the trainers were not able to attend, these kids taught the Capoeira class themselves in a really professional way and their peers respected them. We had a great class. Something powerful happened.

**EP:** The three participants that went to New Zealand were kids that were not succeeding academically and did not have a lot of connection to the school because they weren't getting the academic accolades for performing Capoeira.

But I think their leadership potential has come out of Capoeira. It has given them a whole new sense of “I am somebody, my skills are valued, I'm acknowl-

edged”, and it has improved their responsibility and commitment in a very powerful way.

**CR:** After they came back the way they behaved with the other kids also changed – they were encouraging others to make the movements, they were leading – their self-confidence had improved.

In New Zealand they were the youngest in the group. It was a large group with lots of different people coming from different life experiences. So they gained a better understanding of what it means to be part of a larger community other than the class in Cabramatta High School.

They travelled and were welcome as part of this community and belonged to a master who was recognised at an international level. They gained a different view and more self-confidence to work.

**What does the future hold for Capoeira at STARTTS?**

**CR:** In two or four years' time, or whatever time it takes for us to prepare them, I would like to employ some of the kids that just started performing now to run this program in the Sudanese community. I mean if I can make a wish about what I would like to see happening I would like them to become my colleagues at STARTTS.

**MR:** Well this is my dream also. I'm not here to hold everything. I'm here to share. I will be very happy to share. STARTTS as an organisation will have my students in the future to teach on the program. There is a need for that. It is my dream to have those young kids and others teaching this art form in the future. **R**