

# Implementing a Drum Circle Program at CamdenForward School

## ABSTRACT

Children growing up in low-income households in crime-stricken cities are more likely to encounter stress and trauma in their lives (Attar, Guerra, Tolan 1994). Several interventions have been developed to combat the long term effects that these stressors can have on these children. This project utilized group drumming as a form of music therapy at CamdenForward School (CFS), a school located just outside of one of the nation's most dangerous and impoverished cities, Camden, NJ. The project consisted of weekly drum circles for first through eighth grade students who were identified as having classroom behavior issues. At the conclusion of the project, the participant's teachers completed a survey, which revealed that some students had better behavior after attending Drum Circle and that all students had benefited from their participation. However, due to limitations in this study, more research needs to be done to assess the long term benefits of weekly Drum Circles.

## BACKGROUND

- UrbanPromise (UP) is a non-profit organization that focuses on educating the youth of the city of Camden, NJ, a city struggling with high rates of poverty and violence. The organization was founded in 1988 to help meet the need to provide an escape for the children of Camden, a need which continues to exist today in a city where more than 40% of its citizens over the age of 25 have an education level of high school or below (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). UP has been working to address this need via after school programs, summer camps, K-12 private education at CamdenForward School (CFS) and other programs in its efforts to fulfill their mission "to equip Camden's children and young adults with the skills necessary for academic achievement, life management, spiritual growth, and Christian leadership"(UrbanPromise, 2017). African-American and Hispanic children have been identified as the most affected by the link between stress and living in a low-income household (Glenn Flores, Tomany-Korman, 2008), and the population at CFS is approximately 55% African-American and 37% Hispanic. The UP Wellness Center was created in 2012 in collaboration with the First Presbyterian Church of Haddonfield to serve a complementary purpose by providing initiatives to diminish the impact of toxic stress.
- Discussion with the Wellness Center Director, Rebecca Bryan, and CFS Principal, Denise Baker, revealed that there were a lot of students with classroom behavioral issues. These issues are thought to be due to exposure to trauma. Studies have shown that music can be therapeutic when working with children that have experienced traumatic and stressful events (Garrido, Baker, Davidson, Moore, Wasserman, 2015). In the past, CFS has engaged the Settlement Music School to provide drum lessons for a subset of students, but funding issues have forced them to suspend this partnership. However, CFS leadership staff were open to the possibility of introducing Drum Circles as an alternative. Drumming is an activity that is common among many cultures and requires no prior experience for participation. Creative music expression has been shown to improve school performance, and affect in adolescents (Bittman, Coddington, 2009). With these benefits in mind, this project was created with the goal to utilize drumming as a source of music therapy and an outlet for CFS students who were identified as having behavioral issues at school.

## METHODS

- After receiving a list of children identified by CFS Principal as displaying disruptive behavior and/or having difficulty focusing, several hours were spent onsite observing the CFS classes. During these periods of observation, actions of the listed children and others who appeared to meet the same criteria were noted. Through this process 20 students were identified ranging from first through eighth grade who could potentially benefit from Drum Circles. Permission slips were sent home with these students. To eliminate any stigma related to receiving therapy, the students and parents were not made aware of why they were chosen to participate. Additionally, pre-program surveys were given to their teachers requesting more information about the participants in order to gain insight on the students' behaviors from their teachers' perspective. 17 permission slips allowing these students to participate in the weekly drum circles were received, while nine pre-program surveys were returned from the teachers.
- Drum Circles were planned to be of a one-hour duration, with one group meeting on Mondays and two groups on Thursdays. The afterschool participants ranged from kindergarten to eighth grade.
- The sessions were divided into four sections each with a focus on improving the following areas:
  - Call and Response: ability to follow directions, concentration and focus
  - Build-a-beat: creativity, ability to think on-the-spot and follow directions
  - "Talking" exercise: focus and creativity
  - Freestyle: added early in the program, allowed students to be creative and have fun at the beginning and end of class
  - Towards the end of the program, we began working on performing the song "Royalty" by the group Sounds of Blackness to present to an audience
- Instruments used included djembe drums, tambourines, maracas and other shakers, and bells.

## CONCLUSION

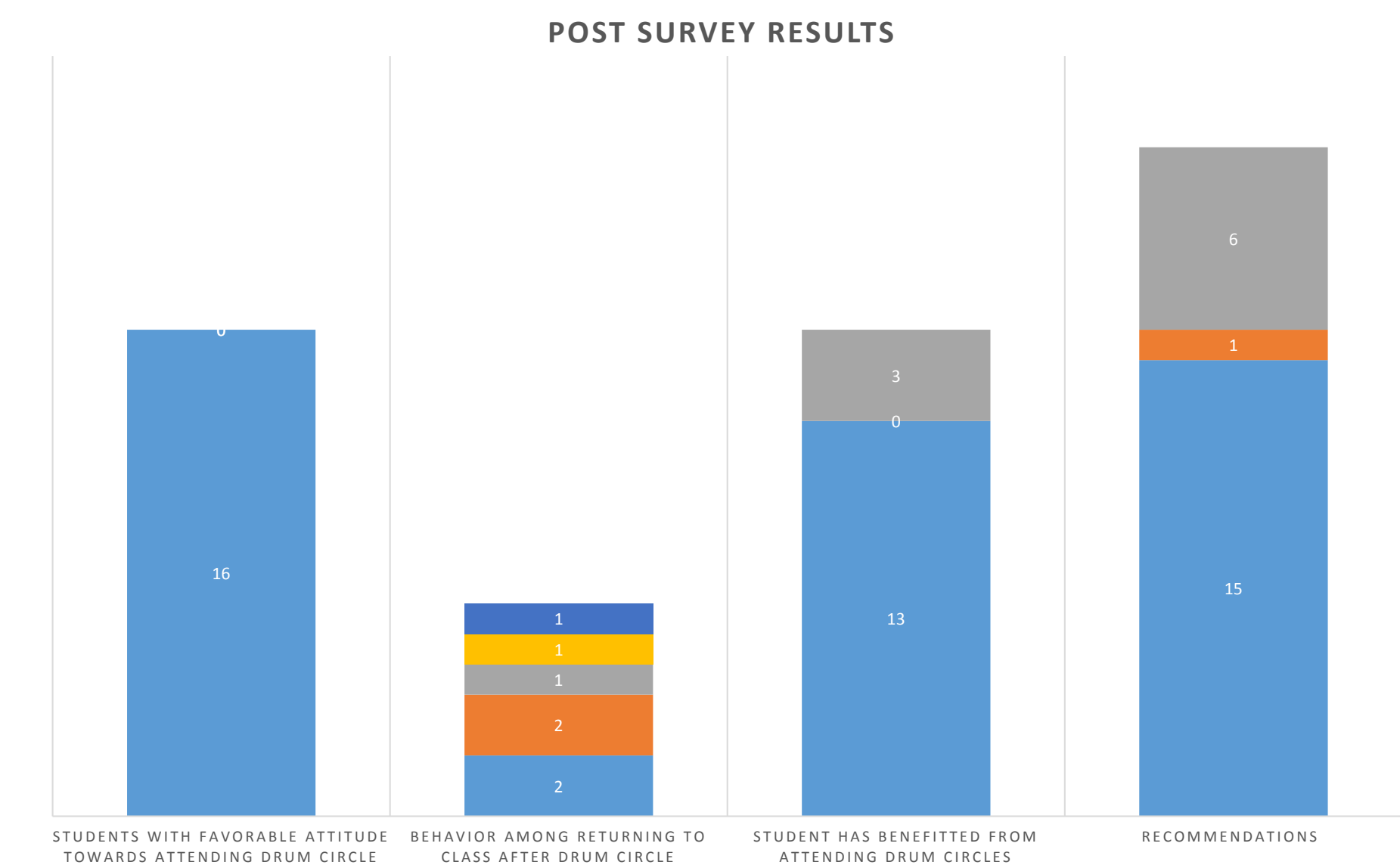
The goal of this project was partially met. According to their teachers, some students had better behaviors in the classroom setting after attending Drum Circle but not enough teachers provided a response to this question. However, teachers noted that all students were excited and looked forward to attending Drum Circles every week, which implies that Drum Circles provided a positive outlet for them. The survey responses indicate movement toward better classroom behavior, but that more interventions are required in order to fully meet this goal. It is also important to reassess the participants at a later date to determine if weekly Drum Circles result in long-term benefits.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It was an honor to work with and to have had an impact on the lives of these children. I hope for further interventions for students like these so that all children can have a chance to develop healthy coping mechanisms to be able to manage their stress well, thereby increasing the chance of a happy, successful life. I commend UrbanPromise and the faculty and staff of CamdenForward School for working to fulfill their mission in Camden, NJ. Specifically, I would like to thank Rebecca Bryan, Denise Baker, and Sharice Hendricks for all their assistance with Drum Circles. Lastly, I would like to thank National Medical Fellowships and the United Health Foundation for providing me with the opportunity to improve the health of an underserved population of this city.

## RESULTS

- A total of 14 Drum Circles took place during school hours, with a schedule that alternated between the grades 1-4 group and the grades 5-8 group. Due to scheduling issues, the younger students had only five Drum Circles, while the older students had nine. The post-program surveys were distributed in the last week of the program and 16 were returned. The results are as follows:



- All teachers agreed that their students had a favorable attitude towards participating in Drum Circles (16).
- Although many teachers declined to answer the question about how their students behaved when they returned to class, the responses that were received revealed that some were more calm when returning to class (2), some had greater focus (2), were less disruptive in class (1), realized no change (1), or acted even more disruptively (1).
- 13 responses stated that the students seemed to benefit from attending drum circles, while three responses mentioned that they needed more time to determine whether the Drum Circles were beneficial to their students.
- The teachers also responded that they would recommend 15 students to remain in Drum Circles, although one respondent stated that they would not recommend a particular student because they believed he was only included due to the initial observation occurring on a "bad day".
- Six responses indicated that the teachers would recommend the program

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