Holyoake’s

DRUMBEAT PROGRAM
Discovering Relationships Using Music – Beliefs, Emotions, Attitudes & Thoughts.

Music as a Tool for Social Learning and Increased Educational Performance.

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Abstract

This article discusses at the development, implementation and impact of a social development program developed by the Holyoake Institute in Western Australia for use in schools. The program DRUMBEAT uses hand drumming to engage young people in social learning that assists them in integrating more fully into mainstream school and community life. DRUMBEAT was developed in response to a range of issues that disadvantaged Indigenous youth within the educational system and acted to reinforce entrenched social exclusion.

Music has proved itself an ideal tool for engaging young people in creative and social learning. It is a tool that leads to a range of additional educational and social benefits including intellectual development and improved social cohesion. The drum is traditionally an instrument of celebration, communication and healing and is the perfect musical medium for a fun program that aims to engage young people. Exploring with them a range of relationship issues that impact upon their own health and happiness.

Operational for five years DRUMBEAT is currently being delivered in over 350 schools across Australia. Since its inception the program has undergone several evaluations, which have demonstrated consistently strong evidence that for many young people participation in the program improves self-confidence, reduces behavioural problems and reduces school absenteeism. The Holyoake DRUMBEAT program is supported by an accredited facilitator training program that has allowed Holyoake to sustain the DRUMBEAT intervention and the outcomes derived from it by equipping facilitators in communities with the tools required to implement the program, so that it can be integrated into a continuous school curriculum.
The Holyoake DRUMBEAT Program –

Music as a Tool for Social Learning

and Increased Academic Performance

Background

Education is widely seen as a pathway to improve life quality and as a ‘protective factor’ that positively impacts on a range of health and social outcomes (Caldwell, 1993; Frankish et al 1996). It is clear however, that for Australia’s indigenous population there are significant qualifications required before that connotation can be reasonably drawn. For several decades now Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their children have been side-stepping increased efforts to improved school attendance by state and federal authorities, as evidenced in continually low rates of school attendance and retention (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2006). The reluctance of Indigenous people to fully engage in the educational opportunities absorbed by non-indigenous Australians is the result of a range of historical, social and cultural factors (Marlin, 2003), and is a key challenge to educators seeking to maximise opportunity within an inclusive educational system.

Accompanying the challenge of low school attendance is increasing behavioural issues that are disruptive to the learning program. In New South Wales for example, school suspensions for Aboriginal students are up to eight times more frequent than for non-Aboriginal students in the same age group (Aboriginal Educational Review, 2006). In Western Australia over one fifth of Indigenous students were assessed with clinically significant hyperactivity associated with restlessness, fidgeting and distractedness (ABS,
Similarly across Australia anti-social behaviour in the classroom is a growing concern and is closely associated with reduced participation in mainstream education (Aboriginal Educational Review, 2006). Student behaviour in the classroom is often linked to social dislocation in the home or community along with feelings of inadequacy and shame when faced with academic tasks (Aboriginal Educational Review, 2006).

Academic achievement in schools with a high proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children is again in the political spotlight due to consistent levels of underachievement when compared to Australian educational benchmarks (ABS, 2006). The reasons behind the underachievement are complex and relate closely to cultural and social factors that continue to discriminate against equal and opportune access to education (Trudgen, 2000). In literacy and numeracy and in overall academic performance the most striking deficiencies are evident in remote communities, where language barriers and limited services add additional challenges to learning (Trudgen, 2000). There is a strong but complex inter-relationship between school attendance and behavioural difficulties and overall academic ability, and this is particularly pronounced among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. This was reflected in the West Australian Aboriginal Child Health Survey, 2006 (WAACHS), which noted both school attendance and behavioural difficulties as key factors in determining success at school.

The final factor in the challenges that define the experiences of many young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students is that of low self-esteem and self efficacy (The West Australian Aboriginal Child Health Survey, 2009). Motivation is critical to how well
children perform at school and is closely linked to a child’s self belief in their ability to succeed (Hallam, 2005). For many young Indigenous children school quickly becomes a place associated with frustration, confusion, self doubt and punishment as they struggle with the difficulties of adapting their primary cultural understanding to the dictums of western educational pedagogy (Groome & Hamilton, 1995, Trudgen, 2000). In the educational environment, levels of self confidence are continuously challenged and both truancy and defiant behaviours can, in part, be linked to the need to protect the ego and reduce this assault on their self-image.

Education is closely linked to social inclusion; a person’s ability to integrate fully into the social and economic life of the community and maintain control of their own life (Caldwell, 1993). Education allows people to make informed choices, to find employment, and to develop healthy social and behavioural relationships that support communities (WAACHS, 2006). In this context the inadequacies and limitations currently being experienced by Aboriginal youth in education present a considerable barrier to the rights and resources of community life and lifestyle that most Australians take for granted. Not least of these is the right to quality health care and longevity of life. The results of the continued educational disadvantage suffered by Aboriginal youth are evident in a range of statistical over-representations in problematic health and criminal outcomes (Vinson, 2009).

Within the above context Holyoake sought to develop an intervention that could address several of the factors that contribute to the higher level of exclusion and accompanying health risks faced by younger members of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander
communities. The school environment was the perfect place to reach out to young people and engage them; and the program was purposefully designed to improve the quality of a young person’s school experience. As well as aiming to enhance the educational experience of students, there were also seen to be potential ‘flow on’ benefits for the school more broadly. The focus was on developing attributes that would be transferable to other mainstream school learning situations and assist in integrating the student into the school community.

Holyoake’s DRUMBEAT program – theory & origins

Holyoake, The Australian Institute for Alcohol and Drug Addiction Resolutions, is one of Australia’s largest alcohol and other drug (AOD) treatment services with branches in most Australian states. Established in Perth in 1975, Holyoake was the first service in Australia to develop a family based model to working with their clients, an approach that has made their service user friendly to Aboriginal clients who place strong value on family relationships. In addition to its therapeutic treatment services, Holyoake has also developed several prevention programs addressing ‘risk factors’ associated with detrimental drug and alcohol use and is a leader in training for professionals working in the AOD sector.

In 2003, at the country location of Holyoake’s Wheatbelt branch, the DRUMBEAT program was developed. The Wheatbelt is an area of 280,000 square kilometers east of Perth, about the size of Tasmania, with a strong Aboriginal presence of Noongar and Yamatje people. The Holyoake DRUMBEAT program was developed in immediate response to the difficulty of engaging young Aboriginal people in talk based therapies
and arose from an idea generated by an Aboriginal Education officer who was successfully using drumming to reduce tensions between young members of warring families in the town of Northam.

Like all of Holyoake’s programs DRUMBEAT is a relationship program. The name DRUMBEAT is an acronym for Discovering Relationships Using Music – Beliefs, Emotions, Attitudes & Thoughts. The theoretical underpinnings for this emphasis on relationship issues are derived from both Social Learning Theory and Family Systems Theories. Within both of these frameworks there is a common acceptance of the importance of the social context in determining behaviour and facilitating behaviour change. The people around us are a primary influence upon our behaviour. Each of us is born into a social context without choice and this lucky dip starts a pattern of behaviour that may or may not be functional and healthy. Across the lifespan each of us will have opportunity to develop new relationships and these will substantially determine the quality of our lives (Bandura, A, 1977). The Holyoake DRUMBEAT program was designed to combine the therapeutic power of music with cognitive behavioural therapy to deliver social learning outcomes that assist a young person to work collaboratively and cooperatively with others and to support increased feeling of self worth.

Raising awareness of the fundamental skills and values that support healthy interaction between people in relationships is the central tenant of the Holyoake DRUMBEAT program (See figure 1). Social relationships are critical in a wide range of areas that allow for healthy personal development including providing the necessary support for times of emotional stress or general hardship. Relationships are vital in our need to maintain a
sense of community and belonging, for improving or maintaining self-esteem and for our
sense of identity. Relationships also provide us with a context in which we develop moral
judgments and social values and promote interpersonal competence (Smith-Christopher,
Nangle, & Hansen, 1993). This emphasis on relationships extends directly to an
individuals quality of life and the success or otherwise of any community, large or small.

The other critical design factor in the early stages in developing DRUMBEAT was
balancing the need for raising awareness of the key learning areas through analogy and
conversation with the use of experiential processes to facilitate learning in a safe and non-
shaming way. In keeping with traditional modes of learning in Aboriginal communities,
the major emphasis in the Holyoake DRUMBEAT program is through the experiential
process – observing, trialing, experimenting (Trudgen, 2000). In DRUMBEAT the music
created by the group serves as a direct reflection of the participant’s level of teamwork
and social skills. The program deliberately avoids any element of competition and instead
focuses strongly on teamwork and the benefits of working with others to achieve things
unobtainable as an individual. This then transfers into skills and consciousness that
support that same young person in a range of other group situations, including
mainstream education.
DRUMBEAT – a tool for social learning and improved educational outcomes

Figure 1
The use of the drum is instrumental to the program’s success. Drumming is common to all cultures including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander traditions, although the type of drum alters widely between communities, from rolled up kangaroo skins to hollow log drums. The Holyoake DRUMBEAT program avoids any cultural classification and does not teach traditional rhythms from any particular cultural or ethnic background. The rhythms taught in the program are derivatives from across the world and as much as possible students are encouraged to make up their own rhythms. This allows for the program to be taught across different communities by a wide range of people without the need for specific cultural knowledge.

A visit to any Aboriginal or Torres Strait community will quickly identify the attraction Indigenous people have for music in general and drumming in particular. Visiting schools in remote communities it is commonplace to see children drumming on homemade objects or to hear stories from teachers about the constant drumming that students do with their hands on their desks. The drum is the perfect tool to facilitate engagement and the relative simplicity and cathartic nature of its practice make it an ideal instrument for those young people who have limited levels of persistence and require opportunities for physical expression. No other instrument attracts in the same way as the drum, is as grounding, or has the potential to engage such a wide range of participants, so immediately. The immediate success that young people have with the drum is another important contributing factor to the high retention rates of the program.

Music generally has a strong association with therapeutic healing and more recently with academic achievement (Hallam, 2009). The Holyoake DRUMBEAT program combines
these twin benefits. From a therapeutic perspective DRUMBEAT provides a safe vehicle for the release of emotion as well as providing a sense of belonging, connection to community and a reduction in social isolation. Participation in the DRUMBEAT program and drumming more generally has also been linked to reductions in stress and anxiety and improvements in mood (Featherstone, J. 2008, Bittman, et al, 2004). Multiple studies have demonstrated that participation in music programs are closely identified with improvements in literacy, numeracy, intellectual development and general attainment (Hallam, 2009).

Recent developments in neuroscience have reinforced these benefits; for instance among young people who have suffered severe trauma and brain impairment at an early age, rhythm exercises have been found to act in support of the regulation of homeostatic states (Perry, 2007). Extensive engagement with music induces cortical re-organisation producing changes that assist the brain in processing and storing information (Schlaug et al., 1995). Music and speech share some processing systems which can lead to enhanced comprehension and improved auditory systems that impact directly on the take up of a second language and reading skills (Sleve & Miyake, 2006, Anvari et al., 2002). Drummers, of all musicians, generate more complex memory traces (Munte et al., 2003) and musical training that focused on rhythm was associated with increased reading comprehension for young people experiencing reading difficulties (Long, 2007). Rhythmic training is also associated with higher temporal cognition, mathematical ability and improved spelling (Rausher, 2009; Overy, 2003).
DRUMBEAT – structure and implementation

The Holyoake DRUMBEAT program is designed for small groups of up to 12 participants. The small group size allows for optimum development of inter-personal relationships between group members and between group members and their facilitators. In smaller groups a sense of trust develops more quickly and communication between group members is improved as each member has more opportunity to be heard. In small groups there is also less need for an autocratic discipline structure and group members can take more responsibility for their own group management (Tyson, T, 1989).

The Holyoake DRUMBEAT program was initially designed to run across ten weeks with one lesson per week of approximately one hour. Most schools and other youth services run DRUMBEAT in this timeframe. The program is also available in an extended version comprising 60 hours of study, which is recognised by the West Australian Curriculum Council as a subject of study in social development under the West Australian Certificate of Education. This form of the program also meets the needs of other state curriculum boards including the South Australian Certificate of Education and the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning. In certain situations, particularly for adult groups, the length of the individual sessions has been extended to up to 2 hours, allowing for more dialogue around the subject areas.

The first six sessions of the program are themed around specific relationship issues. These include boundaries, values, peer pressure, rumour & innuendo, communication, bullying, identity, social responsibility, harmony and teamwork. Many of these subjects are approached through analogies that use the drum, or activities in the group itself, to
create links with what is happening in the program to situations in the participants own lives.

The remaining three sessions are focused primarily on performance rehearsal with a public performance being the final goal of the group. These performances are a highlight of the program and are often incorporated into community events. Participants gain valuable recognition for their skills and effort through the performance, as well as increased acceptance and self esteem. The performance also provides a window through which teachers and parents can see the young people involved in a new light; counter to the stereotypes by which they are often defined.

“*I had quite a few teachers come up to me afterwards and said that it was amazing, we never thought those boys had it in them, so it might give them a new outlook*”.

“I think for the classroom teachers these kids have never been good at anything. The new confidence that they bring with them after having achieved in the DRUMBEAT program has a flow on effect to benefit the rest of their work”.

(Ivery et al, 2009)

Within the program structure there are three learning elements, which are rotated at the facilitator’s discretion to maintain a flexible and engaging lesson structure. The first element is the learning of rhythm songs – interlocking parts on the drum that require a degree of concentration and persistence. Sub groups within each DRUMBEAT group play different parts that fit together in a wide range of arrangements. By the middle of the program the participants are composing their own rhythm songs.
The second element is playing a range of fun rhythm games, that support engagement and provide instantaneous gratification. If the facilitator is losing the attention of his or her participants then the games provide a quick way back to fun and focus. These games are also often linked to relationship issues such as communication and teamwork and the third element, discussion, can often flow from the experience of a game.

The third element ‘discussion’ is an important but flexible part of the program, and allows for self reflection and deeper insight into the relevance of the subject material. In some classes the discussions may take up 50% of the program content in others as little as 10%. The program manual contains key questions in each session that require participants to explore the theme in a personal context. One thing that is clear from research into the effects of the program is that the drumming facilitates new confidence in young people to talk up and participate in the conversations.

“Those students that are shy start speaking up”

“When we first started the program you couldn’t get a word out of anyone, but very quickly they learnt to trust each other and themselves, and then I could hardly stop them from talking”

(Ivery et al, 2009)

The use of analogies is an important part of the program and helps transfer the learning in the DRUMBEAT group to the everyday world. An example of this is the topic of ‘Peer Pressure’. When participants first start to play different, but complimentary rhythms together (session 2), there can often be challenges in holding onto one’s own part and not
getting drawn into the part of the other members of the group. As soon as that occurs the facilitator draws attention to it and its relationship to peer pressure situations and a game is started where a challenge is made for each person, (one at a time), to hold their rhythm while the rest of the group try to distract them with another beat. Then discussions follow that look at what supports a person to hold onto his own rhythm and not get drawn into another’s. Other questions look at when peer pressure is a positive thing and when it is not, and whether adults are subject to it just as much as young people.

**Breadth of Implimentation**

The Holyoake DRUMBEAT program is now being delivered across Australia in over 350 schools, many of which are in regional and remote areas. To facilitate the introduction of the program into areas outside the reach of Holyoake’s own staff a facilitator training program was developed. Holyoake is a registered training organisation and the DRUMBEAT facilitator training was accredited as a certificate four unit in group skills. This three day training not only provides instruction on delivering the DRUMBEAT program but also has a strong focus on the importance of the therapeutic relationship between teacher or facilitator and child. It looks closely at appropriate facilitation skills that encourage self responsibility and empowerment as well as looking at constructive ways of dealing with difficult behaviours. It is recognised that the strength of the DRUMBEAT program is only as good as the skills and commitment of the facilitator who delivers it. At the time of writing this report there were over one thousand accredited facilitators across Australia. As well as schools DRUMBEAT is being delivered to young people in out of school settings, youth services, juvenile detention centres, mental health facilities and drug and alcohol rehabilitation facilities.
DRUMBEAT – The evidence so far

Since its inception in 2003, Holyoake has been keen to document the impact of the program on participants across a range of measures. Self-esteem and emotional intelligence questionnaires are included as part of the program. Feedback from the early formative studies was used to strengthen the program and various changes have been made to the program content and structure in line with the conclusions of these studies. More recently there have been several studies done that focused specifically on the DRUMBEAT programs impact on mental health issues, many of which, including anxiety and depression, are relevant to young Indigenous people. Overall eight studies have been completed, five of which focused on the impact of the program in school settings. Over 350 young people have been assessed in these studies.

Consistent findings have been made in the areas of increased self-esteem, reduced behavioural incidents and improved attendance. Additionally there is overwhelming support for the program by the participants themselves. Using the Rosenberg Self-esteem scale, mean increases in self esteem across the five studies were 15% whilst behavioural incidents were reduced for 29% of participants and 33% reduced their level of absenteeism (Ivery et al, 2009). Student satisfaction with the program was consistently over 90% and this is closely linked to the student’s self-perception of their ability and success. Active participation in DRUMBEAT has led to improved levels of self efficacy and subsequently to increases in motivation that were transferred to other areas of study.

For disengaged pupils particularly, music can lead to greater social adjustment, improved self-reliance and more positive attitudes (Spychiger et al, 1993). Participation increases a
sense of belonging, social networks are expanded, social skills refined and confidence
and self-discipline improve (Hallam & Prince, 2000). Research into participation in
DRUMBEAT has delivered similar findings.

“…… really enjoyed the sessions and looked forward to the weekly lesson. She was
proud to be one of two girls involved in DRUMBEAT. I could see definite growth in her
confidence since participating in DRUMBEAT. In class she appears to be less upset with
herself over errors and mistakes. She is more confident to take risks in her work. She
seems to be more centered in herself”.

“… looked forward to the lessons and shared what he had learned with the class. In
class he is much more settled in himself. He has increased his ability to bounce back
from disappointments and I believe DRUMBEAT has assisted with this growth”.

“…… is very new to the centre and I believe DRUMBEAT has helped him to settle into
this school. He felt proud to be included and he became more confident in his class work
during the ten weeks of DRUMBEAT. In class his ability to take correction without
getting upset improved hand in hand with DRUMBEAT. He learnt from DRUMBEAT the
need for co-operation and perseverance, as he was not a natural at drumming”.

(Faulkner, 2005)

The most recent evaluation of the Holyoake DRUMBEAT program was conducted by the
School of Population and Health at The University of Western Australia. This study
followed 190 students from 19 schools across the state, all with major risk factors. Both
quantitative and qualitative measures were used in this study. In addition to supporting the findings of previous evaluations regarding increases in self-esteem, and social competence, the most recent evaluation reported gains in young people’s understanding of relationship issues: how people get on with each other and what things contribute to healthy relationships. Improvements in concentration, emotional control and general mood were also documented in this report (Ivery et al, 2009).

Longer term follow up indicate that the benefits of participating in Holyoake’s DRUMBEAT program have been maintained 12 months after completing the program (Faulkner, 2006). In the follow up of participants, students maintained higher than average levels of self-esteem and reduced levels of behavioural problems and had no involvement in criminal activity (Faulkner, 2006). The lasting impact of the program however is dependent on the measures the school is willing to implement to build on the successes of the original intervention.

The DRUMBEAT facilitator training emphasises the importance of finding avenues for young people to build on the success of their participation in the program and provides a number of options for how school may do so. Many schools have implemented post DRUMBEAT performance classes and the competence of the students on the drum can be readily incorporated into a schools regular music program if it exists. Other initiatives have seen graduating students mentoring newer members into the program and community initiatives where the drums are taken into community centres and parents and children engage in recreational drumming as a form of community building.
Conclusion

At a time where music is fast disappearing as an option for many young people in schools across Australia, with less than a quarter of Australian students having regular access to music programs (Australian Music Association, 2005), Holyoake’s DRUMBEAT program represents a timely option for those wishing to offer music as part of their curriculum whilst at the same time supporting students alienated from the school community and struggling with an academic curriculum. Music provides young people with a strong source of emotional support when they feel troubled or lonely and contributes strongly to their sense of identity and connection to the world around them (Zillman & Gan, 1997).

Maintaining student motivation is a constant battle for many teachers trying to marry a western education system with Indigenous community life and traditional modes of learning. Holyoake’s DRUMBEAT program addresses the issue of motivation through the attraction of the drum as a fun tool for social learning incorporated into a rewarding program. Students line up to participate in the program and leave with renewed enthusiasm for the school system, increased regard for their own potential, new levels of cooperation, and a general sense of belonging (Ivery et al, 2009). Issues with school attendance are brought clearly to light in examining participation and attendance rates for DRUMBEAT classes.

“These girls are only turning up to school for DRUMBEAT”

Geannette Szczesmy, Teacher, Lockridge Senior High School, 2009

“Everyone wants to do DRUMBEAT”

(Ivery, 2009)
Bringing music into the classroom is beneficial to a wide range of academic skills as well as those connected to personal development. In the renewed argument for a back to basics focus on literacy and numeracy, evidence clearly points to the advantage held in both these areas by students who are involved in music (Hallam, 2009). In particular for children from Indigenous backgrounds, for whom English is not the first language, music lessons can assist the neural pathways to better identify tonal variations and thus help in the acquisition of a second language (Slevc and Miyake, 2006). Listening skills and memory are also both enhanced by music and rhythm practice through activities such as drumming have been found to be most beneficial of all (Attebury, 1985; Long, 2007; Overy 2003). Music is also an excellent recreational pastime and has the potential for some people to serve as a source of employment.

Finally Holyoake’s DRUMBEAT program addresses the social issues most fundamental to all members of society; our relationships with other people. Despite academic generalisations of ‘collective societies’ versus ‘individualistic societies’ all of us rely explicitly on our relationships with others for the quality and the meaning in our lives. To recognise the factors that contribute to healthy and supportive relationships with others and to develop those attributes, to the point where the rewards from practicing them reinforce their use, can be life changing. These are the changes that we predict participants in Holyoake’s DRUMBEAT program take with them into the varying social contexts they engage in, and allow them to develop the types of supportive relationships that all of us need to maintain healthy, happy and rewarding lives.
References


DRUMBEAT – a tool for social learning and improved educational outcomes


