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Physical Culture and Alternative Rehabilitation: Qualitative Insights from a Martial Arts Intervention Program

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Introduction

In 2003, Canada proclaimed a new *Youth Criminal Justice Act* (YCJA), which aims to reduce the use of courts and custody for the majority of adolescent offenders because "measures outside the court process can provide effective responses to less serious youth crime" (Department of Justice Canada, 2013, p. 3). This Act is based on evidence that "involvement in the formal justice system and imprisonment can have more profound and deleterious effects for adolescents than for adults" (Bala, Carrington, & Roberts, 2009, p. 134). The YCJA supports "crime prevention by referring young persons to programs or agencies in the community to address the circumstances underlying their offending behaviour" (Department of Justice Canada, 2013, p. 2). Alternative rehabilitation programs for youth based on physical cultures, including various meditation practices (Barnes, Bauza, & Treiber, 2003; Himelstein, 2011) and martial-art-based interventions (Twemlow & Saaco, 1998; Lakes & Hoyt, 2004), have been shown to provide students with an expanded skill set, including critical thinking, self-awareness, self-control, and overall enhanced mental and physical health. The research project discussed below offered a physical culture prosocial skills development program for young offenders. Specifically, capoeira, a martial art created in the context of the trans-Atlantic

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slave trade in Brazil, was used to facilitate discussion about and advancement of social skills.

In Canada, young offenders have the opportunity to be redirected from regular court procedures by attending a diversion program of the court's choice. One such diversion program in the Greater Toronto Area, Revitalization of Youth (ROY, pseudonym), supports reintegration and recognizes that youth are capable of changing their behaviours, attitudes, and interpersonal relationships when provided with engaging programming in a safe and accepting environment. The program creates opportunities for youth to finish their secondary school education, consider their behaviours and feelings, receive counselling, develop critical thinking skills, reflect on/learn to develop healthy relationships, and learn positive decision-making skills. ROY is particularly focused on creating an environment that allows youth of colour to discover their ancestral culture and develop a positive racial identity. Programs that facilitate and enhance youth awareness of their personal potential, community responsibility, and broader humanity are causally related with decreased criminal behaviour (Cammarota, 2011).

This research is founded on the concepts that: 1) mindfulness and self-reflection are important means of transforming ways of being in the world (Kabat-Zinn, 2003); 2) positive social skills are necessary for youth to engage in mutually beneficial interactions in social situations with peers, teachers, adults, and the criminal justice system (Guerra & Slaby, 1990); and 3) embodied learning facilitates understanding of social and psychological concepts and improves self-expression and communication (Hamill et al., 2011).

This chapter outlines the potential of African-Brazilian martial arts as an alternative rehabilitation strategy. I begin with a review of literatures on martial arts as criminal rehabilitation. Second, I outline the research methods and participants involved in this intervention program that took place in ROY in 2013. Then I discuss the research findings before pointing out the lessons that were learned about physical cultures as alternative rehabilitation through the limitations of this study.

Martial Arts and Rehabilitation

It has been repeatedly demonstrated that the physical aspects of traditional martial arts (e.g., kicks, movement sequences, and

self-defence techniques) must be integrated with mindfulness techniques for effective rehabilitation. Young offenders require the psychological training of martial arts (including meditation to enhance self-awareness and self-control) and the philosophical coaching of martial arts (on issues such as respect, honour, patience, leadership, perseverance, and responsibility) for the physical aspects to be a viable addendum to correctional programs (Trulson, 1986; Twemlow & Saaco, 1998). This combination of the physical, psychological, and philosophical can make a significant difference in drawing disenfranchised adolescents into considering changing their lifestyles and developing their characters positively (Twemlow, Saaco, & Fonagy, 2008). The emphasis on the multidimensionality of martial arts rehabilitation programs should come as no surprise given the meta-analysis conducted by Izzo and Ross (1990) that concluded that cognitive rehabilitation programs are twice as effective as non-cognitive ones.

The therapeutic potential of Asian martial arts such as aikido, tai chi, qi gong, and tae kwon do have been studied extensively. For example, a three-month tae kwon do intervention conducted by Lakes and Hoyt (2004) in a midsize midwestern US city with youth from kindergarten to grade five indicated that the martial arts group demonstrated greater improvements than the comparison group in areas of cognitive self-regulation, affective self-regulation, prosocial behaviour, classroom conduct, and performance on a mental math test.

European martial arts, such as boxing, have also been used for alternative rehabilitation. In a program for young sexual offenders in South Africa, Fight with Insight (FWI), researchers found that combining boxing and cognitive-behaviour therapy was effective for reducing recidivism and creating behaviour change (Draper, Errington, Omar, & Makhita, 2013). These authors highlight the interplay between the physicality of boxing and psychological training that contributes to FWI's effectiveness.

Since it is African diaspora youth who are disproportionately inculpated for so-called anti-social and criminal behaviours (Gittens, Cole, Williams, Sri-Skanda, Tam, & Ratushny, 1995; Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2003; Rankin & Winsa, 2012), many scholars advocate for culturally sensitive treatments (see Bhui, Christie, & Bhugra, 1995; Roysircar, 2009) if therapy is to be effective. As Spencer and Jones-Walker (2004, p. 93) indicate, "the failure to address identity

issues undermines the effectiveness of even the best programs." There is a need to develop rehabilitation programs that incorporate important elements of African cultures (including movement and music) and proffer new definitions of Blackness and masculinity. Rehabilitation programs should empower youth to go beyond the limitations that society has arbitrarily imposed on them. It is worth investigating whether martial arts of African origins could provide additional insights for rehabilitation of youth of African descent.

Burt and Butler (2011) proposed that capoeira may improve pro-social skills among racialized adolescents. "Capoeira…teaches more than just a simple regimen of kicks and acrobatics," Burt and Butler (2011, p. 51) explain. It is different from other styles of martial arts training due to its creation of a social environment that advocates teamwork (Burt & Butler, 2011, p. 50). It is always engaged in by two people inside a *roda* (a circle of participants who play instruments, sing, and clap hands), and therefore cooperation is a key philosophy. Capoeira is also different because, as Wesolowski (2012, p. 85) observes, it prioritizes non-violence through "the use of 'escapes' rather than blocks as in other martial arts," and non-competition through "the seamlessness of games – players replace one another without formal acknowledgment of a winner or loser." Wesolowski continues: "While the main objective is to outmanoeuvre and destabilize one's partner in the space of the *roda* (ring) in which capoeira games occur, there is equal emphasis on maintaining the flowing movement in time with the percussive music and call-and-response singing" (2012, p. 85). While developing these multiple dimensions of practice, Downey (2010) suggests, those who learn capoeira acquire much more than new physical skills. In his study, "[p]ractitioners repeatedly asserted that learning capoeira movements affected a person's kinaesthetic style, social interactions and perceptions outside of the game" (Downey, 2010, p. S232). It is for these varied reasons that Burt and Butler (2011) believe capoeira can be used to improve pro-social skills, specifically to reduce aggressive behaviours, develop teamwork, and promote self-efficacy. Moreover, capoeira is unique in its ability to foster awareness of historical oppression of African peoples and advance a positive Black identity. However, Burt and Butler (2011) did not implement a program to test this theory.

Alves and Seminotti (2006) implemented a program using capoeira as a primary intervention with child and adult patients suffering

from mental health issues in Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil. Though not related directly to criminal rehabilitation, their insights prove valuable for the study described below. Alves and Seminotti (2006) found it necessary for the researcher to be embedded in the workshops to listen to the wants and needs of participants. Participants expressed the importance of capoeira's playfulness rather than aggressiveness as important for developing relationships. They learned to depend on and trust others, which helped them to become more autonomous. The capoeira intervention program described below used a mindfulness approach to alter young offenders' thinking and behaviour patterns. The program was designed to teach physical skills, increase cultural knowledge, link corporeal awareness to awareness of social skills, foster a sense of community, and develop healthy communication and interpersonal relationships among participants.

Research Methods and Participants

ROY is a rehabilitation program that provides an engaging and accepting environment for young offenders to develop personal and interpersonal skills, to increase resilience, and to expand their capacity and agency in a community environment. ROY offers a variety of program options including counselling for mental health issues, employment, education, housing, conflict resolution, substance abuse, and legal advice, as well as training in critical thinking and decolonization, all with a culturally relevant mandate for racialized youth. ROY organizers were keen to expand the physical activity dimension of their programming, which, up to that point, included only basketball and weightlifting.

Kabat-Zinn (2003) advises that instructors should be well versed in the intervention practice they want to teach to be able to authentically transmit teachings to students. Based on my 11-year history of training and teaching capoeira and ten years of experience as an academic researcher, I arranged a partnership whereby I provided a ten-week capoeira workshop series free of charge in exchange for participation of seven youth and two youth leaders in the research project. All participants were made aware of the aims of the research project and signed consent forms. (Participants under 18 years of age signed assent forms and submitted consent forms signed by their legal guardians.)

The findings presented below are the result of interviews, observations, and casual conversations during capoeira workshops with youth who were exclusively 1.5- or second-generation Canadians of African descent. My own identification as a second-generation Caribbean Canadian of African descent was explicitly shared with participants.

Workshops were open to all 21 men and women who participated in ROY programming, but the regularly attending participants (at least six out of ten sessions) were six men and one woman (aged 16 to 23, see Figure 1). Findings are based solely on observations of, and discussions about, their experiences.

Figure 1 Participant Demographics

Name (pseudonym)	National Heritage	Ancestral Heritage	Age	Generation of Immigration	Gender
Curtis	Jamaican	African	17	2nd generation	Male
DaShawn	Jamaican	African	20	2nd generation	Male
Don	Vincentian	African	19	2nd generation	Male
Marlon	Jamaican	African	16	1.5 generation	Male
Jac	Trinidadian	African/ Indian	17	1.5 generation	Male
Stacey	Ghanaian	African/ European	19	2nd generation	Female
Nigel	Guyanese	African	23	2nd generation	Male

Workshops consisted of a ten-minute warm-up followed by 30 minutes of learning the physical skills of capoeira. During these first 40 minutes, students were engaged in constant discussion. They received explicit instruction about the philosophy of capoeira as it pertains to developing social skills, with a focus on one for each of the ten days (resilience, problem solving, following instructions, communication, empathy, taking initiative, listening, negotiating, giving negative and positive feedback, and humility) (adapted from Hazel, Schumaker, Sherman, & Sheldon, 1995). They were taught in a combination of Brazilian Portuguese (the language of capoeira) and English (the participants' native language) with emphasis on the broader cultural aspects of the martial art. Kabat-Zinn's (2003) mindfulness strategies where stress is relieved through developing self-awareness and

self-compassion and participants discover misconceptions for themselves were implemented in discussions with participants throughout the workshops, particularly when they expressed negative emotions or thought patterns.

At the end of each class, participants formed a *roda* and put the physical skills and mental techniques learned into practice for approximately ten minutes. They then discussed the competencies they had learned in class in relation to capoeira philosophy and their life experiences. These post-*roda* focus-group discussions lasted between five and 30 minutes and offered participants a non-judgemental, safe space to speak about their experiences. I recorded observations "of participant activities, perceptions, and the [movements] produced by them…[and my] own reflective data in the form of analytic memos" (Saldaña, 2013, p. 17) as soon as possible after class, typically in a parked car in the parking lot of the group fitness studio or on public transit. Participants were asked to describe their experience in interviews that took place at the end of the ten-workshop series. Interviews were 30 to 45 minutes each and were audio-recorded and then transcribed verbatim. Field notes and interview transcripts were analysed using multiple "cycles" of axial coding as described by Saldaña (2013).

Findings

The capoeira workshop series enabled participants to discover and develop social skills in an embodied way. Training and performing capoeira permitted bodily and social experiments and self-monitoring with guidance; this promoted a shift in the youths' beliefs about themselves and the world, tenets central to mindfulness (see Kabat-Zinn, 2003; Dafoe & Stermac, 2013). In interviews, each of the young male and female participants referred to two main capoeira philosophies that were essential to forming the basis of their embodied and psychological learnings. Discovering how to *levanta* (get up) taught them the important skills of *humilidade* (humility) and *resilência* (resilience). While learning to *conversa* (converse) encouraged *initiativa* (initiative) and *cooperação* (cooperation). Each of these themes is explored in detail below with examples from observations recorded in field notes and interview transcripts.

Levanta! (Get up!)

In focus groups, informal discussions, and interviews, several participants articulated that the most important embodied and psychological lesson they learned was how to react after "failure." We discussed why it is important to *levanta*, that is, get up, don't give up. There were dozens of fieldwork observations similar to the following:

> Last week, I taught students the *au* (cartwheel) movement, a basic acrobatic technique that can be used to enter the *roda* (circle) to start a capoeira game. Today one student, Jac, asked me, "What's the point of doing a cartwheel in a fight?", which elicited laughter from most of the students. I used this as an opportunity to talk about the bodily conversation that happens between two players within a capoeira "fight." "First," I said, "the *au* is a 'call,' inviting the partner you are playing with to try to knock you down off your hands with a headbutt called a *cabeçada*. Then, if you see your partner approaching for the *cabeçada*, you can extend your leg to attack them." I demonstrated this with Jac – who has breakdancing experience and is very comfortable on his hands – asking him to do a cartwheel while I entered to knock him down off his hands with a *cabeçada*. He fell into a crumpled heap and his friends pointed, laughed, and called him names. Jac feigned injury, refusing to get up. When I tried to help him stand, he rolled to the perimeter of the dance studio, alternating between holding his elbow and his hamstring. I continued with the lesson, and Jac remained on the periphery for the duration, ridiculing his peers who were falling repeatedly during training. I asked him to *levanta* (get up) more than once, but he refused. Once the class was dismissed, he finally got up, and, showing that it was not his hamstring that was bruised but his ego that had taken a beating, asked me to teach him how to deliver a *cabeçada* effectively. I practiced with him privately, and he easily learned the skills, knocking me down with a *cabeçada* on his first attempt.

After experiencing that success, it was easier for Jac to get up after being knocked down while training other movements. He and many of the other participants were able to transform their perceptions of their failures from permanent deficits in character/ability to

temporary deficits in skill that can be remedied. Through learning to *levanta,* that is, get up and keep training, when they were knocked down by their opponents, when they fell down due to lack of core body strength, or when they collapsed due to exhaustion from training, they discovered that they had *resilência* (resilience).

Participants became more skilled, stronger, and more fit by the end of the program and were eventually able to do many of the techniques they initially found to be too difficult. Curtis exclaimed at the end of the workshop series:

> I never thought I could do any of this stuff. I used to see this [movement] on Tekken [video game] and be like woah [that's cool]! Trying it and actually being able to do it is wicked. … You don't give up, so I guess that's like, you just keep trying, right? And then you can do it, you know?

Initially, their reasons for not wanting to try were related to humiliation, shame, fear, and degradation by their peers. Writing of African American masculinity, George (1998) suggests that among Black men, pride and arrogance are bound together like electrical wiring, two qualities that become one supercharged current that burns away humility. Within black Caribbean cultures, writes Cooper (2004), the construction of masculinity is preoccupied with aggressive verbalization of dominance. This preoccupation, she contends, "may, in fact, be the impotent manifestation of a diminished masculinity seeking to exercise control in the only way it can" (Cooper, 2004, p. 247). For generations of disenfranchised men, achieving a sense of potency by denigrating others has been an invigorating source of self-empowerment.

In their interactions with peers in the initial workshops, many of the participants used boastful, humiliating words and acts to make themselves feel more significant while denigrating others. This version of masculinity, to which many Black Caribbean Canadian young men are devoted, can be a hindrance to persevering at a difficult task that requires *humilidade* (humility). During classes participants noted: "I suck at this… Everyone's watching me suck" (Jac), and "He can't even balance [on one leg]. He look faggish so I call it like I see it" (Marlon). After the first class, with the help of the program leaders, we reinforced existing ROY rules against denigrating others,

name calling, and homophobic remarks. This was assisted by a rule in the physical activity program that prohibited voyeurs. Everyone who chose to enroll in capoeira was asked to actively participate, even if this meant only holding a kick pad for someone else.

One participant, DaShawn, initially refused to do any capoeira drills, but he held a kick pad for his friend, Jac. On one occasion, he could not believe Jac's inability to make contact with the kick pad he was holding while practicing *armadas* (spinning kicks). Jac said, "You try it, then!" and held the kick pad for DaShawn. After trying it once, he immediately realized how difficult it was, but they worked together and learned to do *armadas* with practice, laughing with (not at) each other. Once participants realized that falling was part of learning, that the only way to avoid falling was to practice more, and that they were *all* learning and falling together, they were more apt to develop *resilência* (resilience) and *humilidade* (humility). This lesson was made explicit at the end of one *roda* when participants discussed why they chose to continue training even when they were tired, incapable, or others were making fun of them. They had a clear role model of what a talented *capoeirista* looked like, and they wanted to improve.

The literature is unambiguous that to reduce recidivism in youth, pro-social modelling, positively reinforcing pro-social skills, and challenging pro-criminal behaviours are effective (e.g., Gendreau, 1996; Raynor, 2003; Trotter, 1990, 1996). *Humilidade* (humility) is one of the most important pro-social skills young people in conflict with the law must learn. Some of the barriers to staying out of the criminal courts include unemployment and lack of education, both of which require perseverance at difficult tasks and overcoming failures. *Humilidade* is the act of lowering oneself, having respect for others who have more experience, and acknowledging one's dependence on others and capacity to learn.

Stacey initially did not believe she would be able to do a *bananeira* (headstand). At first she did not want to even try as she was preoccupied with preventing her shirt from raising above her head rather than learning the technique. I suggested she tuck in her shirt, place a mat against the wall, and practice on her own. Over the course of one class, she went from laughing incredulously because she felt the technique was "impossible" for her to complete to laughing with joy. "I did it!" she screamed after she performed the headstand in the *roda* on the bare floor. She was still beaming days later during our interview:

Janelle: How did you feel at first when you couldn't do the *bananeira* (headstand)?

Stacey: I was like, what the hell? All the guys were doing it first try and I'm like embarrassing myself over there (laughs).

Janelle: What were you thinking?

Stacey: I was like, I'm not strong enough… I just wanted to [be] hiding myself and like disappear.

Janelle: But you stuck with it. We practiced for like 20 minutes… You got it?

Stacey: Well, I just decided I'm here, right? What's the point of coming here and not doing it. Not trying. I just decided, I gotta lower myself…

Mindfulness approaches (Kabat-Zinn, 2003; Dafoe & Stermac, 2013) emphasize enhancing interpersonal communication and increasing awareness of negative thoughts and maladaptive beliefs. Stacey was able to tangibly develop her self-efficacy through perseverance at this daunting physical task by changing "I can't" to "I can" through practice and self-expression. The double meaning of her phrase "lower myself" should be considered here. Lowering her physical self – getting close to the floor, not being afraid to fall over – helped her to lower her egotistical self – being humble, acknowledging that her fear was irrational and that she had much to learn.

Their development of the capoeira tenets of *resiliência* (resilience) and *humilidade* (humility), discovered through their ability to *levanta* (get up) after they fell down, may put DaShawn, Jac, and Stacey at lower risk for recidivism. Since their capoeira training allowed them to practice setting goals, developing solutions, and using mindfulness techniques to overcome feelings of inadequacy, these skills may be transferrable to their other life activities. These findings reinforce Hamill, Smith, and Röhrict's (2012) study of the psychotherapeutic benefits of non-verbal, body-oriented interventions.

Conversa! (Converse!)

One of the most important skills a capoeira adept learns is to keep moving. At all times the body should be in motion, setting up a

partner to take a fall or escaping from an attack. All of these happen with fluid motion and what is referred to as call-and-response and textual innovation, techniques fundamental to African cultural manifestations. Just as a verbal conversation is fluid, each interlocutor taking turns to ask questions and share ideas, the embodied conversation of capoeira remains in motion. As soon as a participant stops moving, stops calling or responding, he or she is sure to receive a blow or take-down. Thus participants are advised to *conversa*, that is, keep moving. In order to do so, they must embrace *initiativa* (taking initiative) and the reciprocal interactions of *cooperação* (cooperation).

Participants learned a variety of skills that became embodied vocabulary. Once they knew how to perform even two or three "words," they could *conversa* (converse) with their bodies. Towards the end of the workshop series, I heard them advise each other: "Don't just stand there!" "Keep moving!" "Get out of the way!" Students learned techniques such as the *ginga*, *balança*, and *quebra*, which are each used to keep the body in motion.

During the *roda* at the end of the third class, I repeatedly instructed two students, Curtis and Stacey, to "buy the game," which means that they should choose one of the players currently in the *roda* and go in to play capoeira with him or her, rather than only standing on the outside of the circle clapping and singing. The peripheral, supporting roles are important, but the best way to learn the game's physical techniques and philosophies is to enter the unpredictable *roda* setting. They adamantly refused to go in, and in the focus group after the *roda*, I initiated a discussion about what it means to "buy the game," in capoeira and in life.

Janelle: Some of you worked up a good sweat in there. But not everyone played. Why not?

Curtis: I just want to watch until I know how to do it.

Janelle: Some things you can only learn by doing. Training in class is not the same as training in the *roda*.

Curtis: But I need more practice first. I'll go in next week. If I don't practice this first you want me to get a bus' head (concussion)?

Stacey: You go in, then you could freeze up like you don't know what to do…(unclear) get kicked.

Jac: But if you try, like we're talking about, just taking a chance, you might find that you do know what to do. At least that's what happened to me.

Curtis and Stacey remained reluctant to take initiative. At first I had to bring them into the *roda* with me only to perform the basic *ginga* step, promising that I would not kick them. Eventually, they were successfully initiating conversations on their own. In several classes students surprised themselves with abilities they didn't know they had. This highlighted for them the benefits of creative self-expression and getting into a conversation rather than continuing to be silent and peripheral.

One youth leader explained the value of the capoeira program for re-enforcing other ROY lessons:

> Yesterday, it was cool cus I brought it up what we did last week about buying the game [going into the *roda*] and *initiativa*. I was telling them about beginning the conversation in our employment class. Their job applications. You would be surprised how many of them don't apply or they don't even try on the ap because they don't think they can get hired. I told them it's like capoeira, if you don't buy the game, you don't get to play. If you don't start a conversation, no one is talking to you. They were like, word, word [agreement]. (Nigel)

The issue of *initiativa* came up on several more occasions as the youth became more adept at the martial art. "How do you know who kicks first?" asked Nigel at the beginning of the third class.

"That is the same question as 'How do you know who talks first in a conversation?'" I replied. "If you have something to say, say it."

"But what if we kick at the same time," Nigel clarified.

"Its just like if you talk at the same time in a conversation. Eventually, one person has to listen instead of talk. If your partner's kick is going to make contact with your body, you might want to stop kicking and escape instead. This will keep the conversation going," I replied.

I gave students a drill to practice this concept. Later in the *roda*, Nigel aptly demonstrated what he had learned. I witnessed him getting kicked by Marlon with a *meia-lua* (half-moon) kick; he immediately transformed his own simultaneous kick into an escape followed by an immediate counter-attack, effectively catching Marlon off-guard. Some of the participants around the *roda* cheered, recognizing that he had put into practice what we had trained in class.

During the drills segment of one class, DaShawn and Michael practiced together the sequence of movements moving down the length of the studio. They took turns kicking and escaping each other's kicks. Michael's *armada* (standing spinning kick) sailed over DaShawn's head, forcing him to quickly duck out of the way; he collapsed on the floor, laughing at the near miss. DaShawn followed this with a *quexada* (standing half-circle kick), also at a quick speed, that Michael narrowly escaped from. I cautioned them to be careful not to hurt each other, but they continued trying to catch each other off-guard, and often the kicker, who was only beginning to develop balance and coordination, also fell down. They laughed without talking, indicating the embodied communication that was taking place. Koshland, Wilson, and Wittaker (2004) along with Levy, Ranjbar, and Hearn Dean, (2006) indicate that non-verbal movement rituals can release tension, reduce pain, hone focus on balance and agility skills, and can also develop effective communication skills and provide insight into patterns of behaviour.

The behaviours of these two young men were a direct contrast to two other students practicing on the other side of the room. Jac and Don took their time, kicked slowly, gave each other time to dodge and counter-attack. At the end of the drill, I asked the four participants to demonstrate their respective techniques for the other class members, and then I asked the class, "What can you learn about capoeira and about social skills from watching this exercise?" Some of their responses included: "It looks nicer if you go slow." "If you take your time, the other person can figure out what they are going to do." "You have to help your partner. It can't be all you or all him." "You really can't do anything by yourself." These comments led to an in-depth discussion of the capoeira principle of *conversa*, its associated concept, *cooperação* (cooperation), and the ways in which a person can benefit from being an active listener but also not be afraid to initiate valuable conversations if they have something to say.

When asked to describe his experience in the ten-week workshop series, Curtis said, "I don't like to fight, so this is good." Though Curtis had been arrested for attempted assault, and the pressures of his social environment required a tough exterior and fighting skills, he preferred to have an outlet for physical exchange of experience *without* violence. This martial art allowed him to reflect on his strengths and weaknesses and made him aware of his and other people's bodies

not just as objects but as moving, feeling bodies that he must be careful not to hurt or be hurt by.

Encouraging adepts to use their voices and bodies to *conversa*, that is, engage in a thoughtful back-and-forth dialogue, rather than attacking, or talking "at" or "over" each other, encouraged teamwork and social inclusion. As Gieser (2008, p. 300) notes, learning a skill by observation and imitation of a teacher creates profound kinaesthetic experiences: "there are (bodily) movements and something that goes beyond the body, that is, something that connects the movements of two people." The embodied conversation practitioners engaged in is a complex, intersubjective process that emphasizes *cooperação*: connection rather than competition. This bodily conversation is a proxy for "real-life" social skills, which require patience, listening, giving and receiving negative feedback, willingness to accept responsibility, negotiating, peaceful conflict resolution, and problem solving (Huebner, 2003; Bailey & Ballard, 2006).

Marlon explained in an interview that martial arts can improve the ability to reflect on feelings in the moment: "I kinda learned to think about the other person. Like if I'm having an altercation I just thinked about what he's saying and come up with something [verbal] instead of just going off [fighting]." Capoeira training helped youth develop skills to think about their feelings rather than following their defensive impulses. This type of improved self-regulation can aid in reducing recidivism (Dafoe & Stermac, 2013).

Discussion

Studies examining social skills deficits in early childhood and adolescence demonstrate that youth who exhibit poor social skills may have an assortment of behavioural problems and struggle with the ability to successfully direct their lives. Youth who focus on dominance and lack emotional connections in interpersonal relationships, exhibit feelings of narcissism and entitlement, lack desire to work hard, self-justify their incongruent talk and action, and carry unrealistic expectations about the consequences of their anti-social behaviour end up experiencing frustration, emotional stress, and delinquency (Elliot, Huizinga, & Menard, 1989), and hamper their chances of effective rehabilitation (Walters, 1990). To be valuable, a rehabilitation program should develop the opposite, positive skills to

reduce recidivism. An important benefit of community programming in physical and artistic pursuits is the development of pro-social skills (Bloomberg, Ganey, Alba, Quintero, & Alcantara, 2003; Hansen, Larson, & Dworkin, 2003; Jarrett, Sullivan, & Watkins, 2005; Heath, 2001). The embodied dimension of community programming should not be underestimated.

The use of martial arts as rehabilitation represents a paradigm shift from talk therapies alone to incorporating talk with more interactive and embodied methods of rehabilitation. An African-Brazilian martial art, capoeira offers a chance to 1) see oneself as part of a whole through the *roda* formation where everyone participates, 2) learn how to cooperate, trust a partner, and take initiative, and 3) develop humility and self-confidence through repeated failures and successes at physical skills. Importantly, capoeira is fun, and it is a martial art with African roots that may facilitate connections for Black youth due to its cultural relevance (Dei & Kempf, 2013).

Classes involved a lot of laughing, verbal and non-verbal dialogue, and sweating, which put people at ease, allowing them to open up, which is essential in therapy (Day, 2004). Moreover, the fun participants got out of putting their hands on the floor, lifting their legs, toppling over, and engaging in other childlike behaviours allows "linking connected elements of [their] current behaviour and thinking to a kinesthetic mindset more typical of earlier preverbal developmental stages" (Twemlow et al., 2008, p. 3). Making participants conscious of using their bodies in new (old) ways is necessary "to transform destructive aggressiveness into constructive self-confidence (Twemlow et al., 2008, pp. 2–3). The opportunity to observe and therefore become aware of their movements (or lack thereof), thoughts, behaviours, the ways they interact with others, and the consequences of their actions empowered youth, who began to see the degree of control they have over themselves and their relationships, and their ability to transform their bodies and their personalities. Capoeira training can provide cognitive, behavioural, and embodied skills that help youth to face daily stresses, communicate with peers and authorities, and overcome the challenges of life.

At the end of the ten-week capoeira program, participants noted that they could recall the psychological and philosophical lessons of the day because of the physical drills associated with them. They remembered *cooperação* (cooperation) by reflecting on the opportunity to

use a kick pad, noting how they let out frustrations by making physical contact, the meditative effect of the rhythmic hitting of the pads, and the importance of working together with a partner who held the pad for them. They remembered learning *humilidade* (humility) through practicing to give a *cabeçada* (headbutt) that makes a person fall. Many youth noted that their ankles, bottoms, and egos were bruised from falling so much. As Stinton (1995) puts it, knowledge is in our bones and muscles. Corporeality is not opposed "to mental, psychological, cultural or other so-called non-material aspects of existence" and should not be reduced merely "to technical or instrumental skills" (Maivorsdotter & Lundvall, 2009, p. 267) because bodily expressions are connected to thinking processes. When students were asked to reflect on how certain movements feel, and how physical techniques can relate to life outside the training space, they connected somatic and semiotic meanings for a memorable experience.

The how and what of youth development has been studied extensively for decades. We know youth learn social skills from adult direction, from watching others' behaviours and their consequences, and from experiencing connection with others and collaborative efforts to work through social situations (Roedell, Slaby, & Robinon, 1977). Recent research from the field of movement therapy suggests that social skills can also be learned from embodied practice at reciprocal interactions, mirroring, and contributing to a dance circle to "facilitate a (non-verbal) dialogue through which people…can communicate and connect more effectively," especially in those for whom verbal communication is difficult (Hamill et al., 2012, p. 717). According to Violets-Gibson (2004), the circle helps to create a safe holding environment. Group members can play and experiment to the music in the presence of each other, and the familiar African-based movements and rhythms can help youth to reconnect with their own bodies, thus accessing memories and facilitating emotional expression.

This research echoes the findings of Milliken (2002; 2008) and Downey (2010), who found that the process of physically imitating a teacher or partner is transformational because it demands not only adopting new physical skills but also "a whole body transformation in strength, flexibility, mobility, [and] perhaps even personality" (Downey, 2010, p. S22). Drawing from Bordieu's *The Logic of Practice*, Downey (2010, p. S27) explains that capoeira can inculcate "subconscious intellectual values, systems of categorization, and perceptual

schemas… As the novice seeks to imitate new styles of moving one of the central obstacles he or she must confront is unconscious patterning, unexamined inhibition, and corporeal reservations that are only apparent when challenged by new kinaesthetics." Confronting pervious ways of thinking and moving can allow for the development of new skills and "may fill a gap that exists in the cognitive approaches" to rehabilitation currently used (Milliken, 2008, p. 6). Participants in this program provided evidence of increased cognition of their negative thought and behaviour patterns and emphasized learning humility, resilience, initiative, and cooperation, among other skills. Each pro-social skill was clearly linked to a physical lesson and broader life implications. The process of challenging the body and mind, where there is an explicit focus on learning pro-social skills, is an effective way of transforming thoughts and behaviours among young offenders. It remains to be seen how long-lasting their transformations will be.

Limitations

There is much to learn from a study such as this, which took place with a number of constraints, not least of which is the structure of the research project, including the sampling procedures, the intervention duration, and the program evaluation, which could all be expanded for more in-depth analysis.

It should be noted that the capoeira program was made available to all youth involved in the ROY court diversion program (n=21); however, only a small number (n=7) chose to participate consistently (at least six out of ten sessions). Those who self-selected to participate may be those with the lowest levels of strain (e.g., physical/emotional abuse and intra-familial violence, parental or personal drug use, and history of crime) and the highest level of coping skills (in cognitive, emotional, physical, social, and spiritual domains), therefore making it easier for them to see how capoeira could be helpful to expand their coping skills and how the philosophies of the martial art could be applied to their everyday lives. Many of those who refused to participate disparaged capoeira as "dancing," suggesting it was feminized, non-athletic, and even childish. Furthermore, many of the participants were friends, and the problem with such a convenience sample is that it "contains only those individuals who [come forward

to participate]…and feel strongly about the issue being investigated. These individuals are probably not representative of the general population," as Gravetter and Forzano (2012, p. 151) note.

A larger group and more quantitative measures, such as use of a Jesness Inventory, could improve research rigour. Although the sample presents challenges in terms of generalizability of findings and, more broadly, applicability of findings to other ethnic groups, genders, and age groups, it is reasonable to conclude that other rehabilitation programs in other locations may have similar demographics and participants of African descent who would benefit from such a program. Nevertheless, the small group size was necessary for a single teacher to give sufficient attention to all students to develop rapport and ensure safety.

Also, long-term training and follow-up interviews or questionnaires would be necessary to assess recidivism and the permanence of personality/behaviour changes. A longstanding critique of (especially alternative) rehabilitation programming has been insufficient evaluation and follow-up. Researchers should make use of "an empirically based method for evaluating the effectiveness of rehabilitation programs not solely dependent on post-release recidivism as a measure of effectiveness" (Withrow, 2002, p. 33).

Another significant concern is the gender dynamics of the teacher-student relationship. First, a gender match between teacher and student may have elicited greater participation and respect. It is suspected that teenage young men may identify better with a young male teacher, rather than a female teacher twice their age. It has been shown that positive relationships with adult staff in community programming is a significant factor in continued participation and gaining benefits of programming for ethnic minority youth (Lee, Borden, Serido, & Perkins, 2009; Diversi & Mecham, 2005). In research this author has completed with groups of young Black women, the issue of identification with a female capoeira teacher has been raised on several occasions.

Last, the complexity of the youths' pasts, including sexual and physical abuse, drug use, unemployment, and school drop-out and push-out mean that a multipronged approach is necessary to make lasting change in their behavioural skill set. As Twemlow et al. (2008) and Burt and Butler (2011) suggest, in addition to a highly trained martial art interventionist, clinical oversight is essential for mental health evaluation, medication administration, and in-depth

psychotherapy for some young offenders. This is especially so if we consider that exposure to trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms are risk factors for anti-social behaviour that can lead to justice-system involvement (Becker & Kerig, 2011). The staff at ROY were cognizant of the multidimensional assistance youth required, including support with employment, housing, and pro-social skills. The capoeira intervention program focused only on the latter.

Despite these limitations, this study suggests that African-diasporic physical activity has much to offer youth in terms of fostering social skills and self-awareness. A ten-week capoeira rehabilitation program offered opportunities to practice, discuss, develop, and reinforce pro-social skills in an embodied way.

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