

Therapeutic Arts in Schools – Final Report

A partnership between Free Arts for Abused Children of Arizona and Children First Academy of Phoenix

Executive Summary

From September 2013 to May 2014, Free Arts for Abused Children of Arizona partnered with Children First Academy of Phoenix (CFA) to provide arts programming for 330 students. Contracting six professional artists and with the help of twelve dedicated volunteers, Free Arts provided 9 weekly sessions for students, three in-service trainings for teachers, three all-school assemblies, and a collaborative mural to the community at CFA. As a result of Free Arts programming, youth experienced an increase in self-confidence, positive behaviors, and engagement in school. Qualitative data and observations also show an increased sense of community and emotional support at the school.

Introduction

From September 2013 to May 2014, Free Arts for Abused Children of Arizona partnered with Children First Academy of Phoenix (CFA) to provide a series of multidisciplinary arts sessions for their students. CFA is a public charter school which serves 330 underserved and underprivileged K-9 students. CFA provides a high quality education for these children by doing two things: First, reducing and eliminating the barriers and obstacles that interfere with the education of each child and, second, providing an educational curriculum that brings each child's performance at least up to their proper grade level. Free Arts entered into this partnership hoping to increase school engagement and positively affect student behavior.



Throughout the school year Free Arts supported six professional teaching artists, (supported by volunteers and Free Arts staff), to teach weekly sessions to students aged 5 – 14. Participating youth were selected by their teachers each term with each teacher choosing 3 students to take part in the program for a total of 15-24 students per session. Some teachers used the Free Arts program as an incentive for students, while others selected youth who had “borderline” behavioral or academic records with the hope that participating in the program would help them feel successful and engaged.

Teachers worked with students to select which session they participated in. Options included: African drumming, hip hop dance, Native arts (beading, fabric art and collage), creative movement, spoken word poetry and imagination arts (mask and model making). Professional teaching artists for this program were selected

based on their teaching experience, work with similar populations, and past success in Free Arts programs. We also engaged teaching arts that we knew would work well in a highly transitional environment with constant changes and new challenges. Free Arts mindfully selected volunteers to support each teaching artist's set of sessions; at first by placing only one volunteer in each session. By the second semester, Free Arts increased the number of volunteers to maintain a 3:1 student to adult ratio; The 3:1 student to adult ratio is the ideal ratio for Free Arts programs and, we think, a large part of the success of this specific program at CFA and other Free Arts programs.

According to program evaluations from our 20 year history, we know that participating in the arts gives children of all ages an opportunity to feel successful, develop positive coping skills and create relationships with trusting adults. As we embarked on this new program and partnership, we hoped the Professional Artist Series would also impact youth by providing an incentive to attend school, reducing anxiety levels through focus and concentration, and allowing for student leadership opportunities.



In addition to resiliency based goals, we also felt that it was important to equip teachers with tools for them to provide continued therapeutic arts experiences in their classrooms outside of the Free Arts residencies. To this end, Free Arts provided CFA teachers with three in-service trainings. The first training focused on providing the teachers an understanding of how youth benefit from participating in the arts and served as a group meeting to discuss expectations for the partnership. For the second training, Free Arts contracted Paul Fisher of Arts Integration Solutions to present strategies on how to use the arts to teach core curriculum. Lastly, Free Arts staff led an experiential session focused on giving each teacher time to reflect on their year and their students' time with Free Arts through an art activity and discussion. The in-service trainings allowed Free Arts staff to understand the dynamics of the school, the culture and the administration and also allowed us to collect valuable qualitative data and discuss new ideas and strategies for programming with the teachers.

Another component of the CFA program offered three opportunities for the whole school to get a "taste of Free Arts". In the fall, this took the form of two assemblies where the Free Arts students performed for the rest of the student body. The assemblies were often the most meaningful part of the program for the students who had participated in the series of sessions as so many of them received positive recognition from their teachers and peers for the very first time. In many cases performing also allowed students to successfully conquer a fear - a great way to intrinsically increase self-confidence. At the end of the third term we hosted a Free Arts Day for the entire school (330 students). Students, teachers and Free Arts volunteers rotated between stations where they decorated masks, created cards, wrote poetry, and learned dance moves with the professional teaching artists. The students loved being able to participate in the arts as so



many of their classmates had throughout the year, and teachers loved being able to play alongside their students. Lastly, Free Arts contracted professional artist Kristine Kollasch to collaborate with CFA students on creating a large mural for the CFA campus. Under Kris's leadership, students designed, painted and constructed a 16 x 12 foot wooden mural which now hangs on the exterior wall of the school. Every student at CFA signed their name and decorated a piece of this mural.

Methodology

We collected data on the Professional Artist Series program at CFA in a variety of ways. At the start of each term (of which there were three) each student participating in the program completed a pre-survey that asked them to rate their agreement with a series of statements on a 3-point scale. Statements focused on assessing their experience with the arts and how they feel about and behave at school. Students completed the same survey at the end of each term in addition to answering questions about general satisfaction with the program. These surveys were entered into a spreadsheet which calculated the number of students who experienced positive, negative, or no change to each statement. The comments from these surveys were compiled and coded along with additional qualitative data.

Qualitative data was collected through journals and interviews. During the first two terms, students wrote in their journals at the beginning and end of each day of class. Our hope was that we would be able to assess changes in their feelings and attitudes towards school after participating in the series sessions. We found that the journals were not accurately collecting this information, so in the third term, we allowed each artist to individualize the writing prompts for his/her class. This enabled us to collect more information directly related to the specific session and how the students felt about participating and about themselves.

At the beginning of the school year series, Free Arts selected six case study students who would participate in all three terms of the Free Arts sessions. We interviewed these students at various intervals to collect information about their thoughts and feelings toward the program, themselves and their fellow students. Interviews were transcribed by an outside company and then coded, along with the journals entries, by comment type (general feedback, self-perception, community perception, performance reflection, types of stressors, and other) and entered into a spreadsheet that allowed us to look for common themes.



We surveyed teachers at the end of the program about their overall impressions. The data was translated into a spreadsheet and the comments were coded for qualitative analysis.

Evaluation Results

Students

We collected very meaningful data from both the journals and the interviews with the case study students. When analyzing this data we found two common themes: 1) Students feel good and enjoy themselves when doing the art. 2) Students feel nervous before and then proud following the final performances- which indicates an increase in positive self-perception. Here are a few quotes illustrating those themes:

“Free Arts makes me feel like a better person.”

“I feel so good. Free Arts makes me feel young and wild and free!”

“It was so amazing!”

“I feel amazing! We performed in front of the entire school. I was having butterflies in my stomach at first but then James gave me courage.”

“I was nervous at first, when I was doing the free style, but I knew I could do it. This was the most fun thing we have done.”

“I felt appreciated because everyone was clapping for us.”

“I was nervous but I knew it was going to be fun!”

“I guess today was a good day, but I felt great after the performance. I felt like I was somebody.”

“I felt great and nervous. It was awesome to know Mr. Tomas taught me to do things I wasn't brave to do. The performance was the best thing that happened to me all year. I had the most amazing time with Free Arts!”

We were also able to collect information about the effects of the program on two students who participated in all three terms; sisters Molly (age 7) and Louisa (age 8). At the start of the program they were reluctant to participate and defiant with our instructors. They left class, wouldn't participate and were distracted other students. By the final term they were leaders in their groups. They shared with us the impact Free Arts had on them, their family and their school:

Change in self

“If I was not in Free Arts, I would still be the way I used to be.”

“[Free Arts] made me better because I would always use to argue with my sister and get angry at her and then now when I do Free Arts, I am nicer to her.”

“I am different because the first time I went in Free Arts, I was scared and my sister, she was scared, too, so I sat on these stools by her. Once the first day, I start playing, doing things, I start getting happy, and still a little scared. But the third day they told us that we were going to do a performance so I got scared [and] I ran out the door. But now my favorite memories are the first time when I did the performance and the other time I did the performance.”

Impact on family

“I love Free Arts because we get to be here and I always tell my mom and my dad, and my mom is really happy for me to do this. And my mom and my dad every day on Wednesday, even if we do not have Free Arts, my dad is like, “What did you guys learn?” And then sometimes I say, “Nothing,” if we do not and then sometimes I really tell him, “I really love Free Arts.” And then sometimes I want it to just be every day.”

“He (Frank the drumming instructor) taught me drum lessons and I teach my brother sometimes and my brother plays with drums. I teach him and that is very nice because it is really fun teaching my brother how to do the drums.”

These two sisters come from a particularly broken home so it was quite poignant that they discussed the fact that they were able to talk about and teach what they learned at Free Arts to their family members.

Impact on school

“I think it [Free Arts] changed us to do work and because you know the big kids? Some of them do not do work and then some people in Free Arts and it changed, there is only about five people that do not do work anymore. But it changed our school. It changed my classroom because the people in the classroom are – I do not want to say bad but now they do different choices.”

We had hoped that through the pre and post surveys that we would be able to show a marked change in the students’ attitude toward school and in their knowledge of arts and culture. This was not the case. Instead, most of the students showed no change in any of the areas we assessed. We attribute this to the age of the students and their literacy levels. Most of the youth we served through this program were under the age of 8, many reading well below grade level. We worked to support them in completing these surveys by providing plenty of adult volunteers to help but still did not achieve the results we expected.

Teachers

At the end of the year teachers completed surveys reflecting on the impact that the Free Arts program had on their students, themselves and their school. These surveys revealed the most about the overall impact the Free Arts Professional Artist Series had at Children First Academy. Here are a few of the findings:

78% of surveyed teachers felt that students who participated in the Free Arts Professional Artist Series seemed more engaged in school after participating.

“They (the students) come back ready to learn and more positive.”

94% of surveyed teachers said that students who participated in the series seemed to feel better about themselves after participating.



"I have one student who was a very closed individual. Free Arts has changed his whole personality and he's actually starting to be a goofball at times. Art heals!"

"One student who has special needs has had increased acceptance among his peers since participating in drumming."

"When their classmates tell them how well they did performing they seem to get the self-esteem and confidence boost they need."

78% of surveyed teachers said that students who participated in the Professional Artist Series had increased positive behaviors since participating.

"I have a student who has had behavior issues all year. Having him set goals before each Free Arts session allowed him to remain focused outside the classroom."

"Students are more encouraging toward each other."

"I had a student who did not make the best choices before Free Arts and ever since participating has been a role model for others."

78% of surveyed teachers said that having Free Arts at their school helped them as teachers.

89% of surveyed teachers said that Free Arts helped create community within their school.

Although we were not able to obtain academic records, 35% of teachers said that students who had participated in the Professional Artist Series had increased academic scores; 65% of teachers said that the impact on academic scores was neutral.

Summary

As many teachers perceived an increased sense of community at the school due to Free Arts presence- staff, artists and volunteers recognized this as well. Every day we were at the school and walking the halls in our blue Free Arts shirts we were approached by students interested in Free Arts. "You're the Free Arts lady!", "Is Free Arts here today?" "I want to do Free Arts!" are some of the comments we heard. We believe that this sense of community was a result of four things: 1) We worked with just a few students from each classroom who returned to their classrooms talking about their experiences. The word spread quickly that Free Arts was something special and many students wanted to participate. (In fact, the number one improvement that was recommended to us by the teachers was to find a way for ALL of the students in the school to participate.) 2) The sessions included students from all grades, allowing them to interact across grade levels- which for some students was the first time. Those interactions carried into other areas in the school with youth interacting in the hallways and at lunch as well. One young student remarked to a Free Arts staff member about an older student, "That's Isiah, he's a big boy and a nice boy and he's my friend." 3) The final assemblies encouraged all students to be brave and to support each other. The final assembly with the addition of the Free Arts day allowed every student and teacher in the school to come together in a new way. 4) Most of the teachers seemed to really enjoy and support the addition of creativity and the arts in their school and those feelings trickled down to their students.



Discussion and Limitations

We had several logistical challenges during this program. First, as the youth were coming from all different classrooms located all over the school, it was difficult to facilitate getting them all to the classrooms where the sessions were taking place. We put in place a loose method of having the volunteers and older students gather the younger students and then walk them back to their classrooms after the sessions. This felt chaotic and often resulted in sessions beginning late. Additionally, teachers often forgot to send their students or had other activities (like testing) going on that required students to stay in their classrooms instead of participating in the Free Arts sessions. This caused a great fluctuation in weekly session attendance and required volunteers and artists to be very flexible. We are interested in looking at a better method of gathering youth on program days next year.

Though the wide age range allowed for students to connect across grade levels and mentor each other, it was often difficult for our teaching artists to instruct at an appropriate level for all of the youth. Next year we may explore limiting the sessions to a span of 3 to 4 grade levels instead of all 10.

As mentioned before, we were limited in our ability to collect meaningful data from the younger students by their literary skills and hope to implement a better survey system specifically for younger students next year. We had hoped to collect more data from the teachers but very few responded to our mid-year online survey or our "suggestion journal" throughout the year. Surveying teachers was most effective in a group setting, verbally, and at the end of the year in written format (with the bribe of a Popsicle once surveys were submitted!). We also failed to get attendance and academic records of the participating students as we did not know who to reach out to and what legal issues surrounded our collecting of that data.

Moving into a new school year we will be working with a brand new school administration and an almost completely new school staff (one teacher is returning). We know that the consistency of having Free Arts back will be important to many of the students. Moving forward we plan to incorporate the following changes:

- Identify a CFA staff member to be the main contact for the Free Arts Professional Artist Series
- Create a system ahead of time for gathering students and communicating with teachers
- Explore working with a smaller range of ages
- Host kickoff teacher meeting and a kick off assembly at the beginning of the year to show kids what art forms they will be able to choose from
- Revise the pre/post student survey to include questions/statements that focus on success, self-perception, and coping skills and/or collect quantitative data differently.
- Plan a fall AND a spring Free Arts Day
- Schedule a session with teenage students at CFA to produce a mural in the upstairs hallway
- Recruit more volunteers with daytime availability to continue a 3:1 child/adult ratio

Conclusion

Through our residency at Children First Academy Free Arts served 330 total youth (165 in sessions, 330 during the Free Arts Day and assemblies). Our programs helped create a community within the school where students and teachers could be brave and support each other across grade levels. Participating students experienced an increase in self-confidence, school engagement and focus and overall, felt “good” when participating. In a school where most students have faced challenges including homelessness, violence, abuse and neglect, these changes impact the students’ ability to achieve and succeed in school and in life. We learned a great deal from this program in 2013/14 and look forward to making some structural changes in 2014/15 that will improve logistics and data collection.

*All student names that appear in this report have been changed in order to protect their privacy.

