



# BREAKIN' BEYOND HIP-HOP: Experiences of Participants in the Unity Charity Dance Program

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## **SUMMARY**

- The transition from childhood to adulthood can be a source of stress for young people as they cope with the pressures of meeting societal, parental and school expectations
- 10-20% of Canadian youth are affected by a form of mental illness – the single most disabling group of disorders worldwide
- Only 9 % of Canadian youth meeting recommended levels of physical activity for their age group
- Community dance programs act as a health-promoting strategy for young people and result in improved physical health, mental wellness, creativity, and self-confidence

### **Unity Dance Program**

- Unity Charity uses hip-hop art forms to engage adolescents in positive expression of stress and empower them to develop confidence and skills for success.
- Trained artistic educators hold weekly open breakdance and hip-hop dance sessions in community spaces.

### **Purpose of the Study**

To explore the perspectives of young people who participate in the Unity dance program regarding the nature and impact of the program on their physical, social and mental well being

### **Study**

- Focus groups were held with 27 youth from 4 Unity community dance programs

### **Findings**

All focus group participants revealed similar perceptions about their experiences. Themes that emerged from the discussions included the importance and value placed on;

1. A strong sense of belonging to and identifying with the Unity community
2. The cool and creative culture of break dancing that attracts young people and provides a platform to develop skills for success
3. The personal experience of self-growth and maturity
4. Break dancing as a creative art that encompasses the enjoyment of body movement
5. The strong mentoring and leadership provided by the artistic educators and the access to free and safe space, vital to the success of the program

The Unity dance programs provide access to a cohesive community and a unique cultural experience, as well as a place for self-growth, physical activity and artistic expression.

## 1.0 BACKGROUND

As they mature, youth face multiple complex changes and demands associated with growth, biological change and psychosocial development. This time of transition from childhood to adulthood can be a source of stress for young people as they cope with the pressures of meeting societal, parental and school expectations.



Various agencies have raised concerns about the physical and mental health of youth. The Canadian Mental Association estimates that 10-20% of Canadian youth are affected by a mental illness or disorder – the single most disabling group of disorders worldwide.<sup>1</sup> Physical health is also a concern, with only 9 % of Canadian youth meeting recommended levels of physical activity for their age group.<sup>2</sup> From a social perspective, despite youth wanting to fit in with their peers, more than 25% have indicated having a low sense of community belonging.<sup>3</sup>

This combination of low levels of physical activity, heightened stress levels and minimal social support among youth is problematic, and suggests a need to create safe environments for youth to engage in programs that promote both physical and mental health and social well-being.

Community based programs contribute to youth health and development by offering an environment that helps adolescents develop resilience, increased confidence, and enhanced conflict resolution and social skills.<sup>4-10</sup> Youth community programs have also been found to support the development of interpersonal skills, self-control, and self-efficacy, while decreasing risk of substance use, school misbehaviour, and high-risk sexual behaviour.<sup>6,7</sup>

One such program is Unity, founded in 2007 as a not-for-profit, registered charity that offers community based and after-school programs that utilize art forms that are part of the hip hop culture to empower youth with the confidence and skills for success.<sup>11</sup> Creative activities in hip-hop culture (such as breakdance, hip-hop dance, spoken word, and graffiti art) are employed to allow youth to 'express their stress.' Artist educators encourage the use of these arts to explore individuality, identity, and open-mindedness.<sup>11</sup> Core values of respect, integrity, passion, community, and a focus on youth all work together to facilitate Unity's vision to "empower youth to use artistic self-expression to make positive life choices leading to more productive citizens, safer schools, and healthier communities."<sup>11</sup> There are currently 26 Unity programs in Canada.

"Breaking" is one of the four components of the hip-hop cultural movement that emerged in the 1970s in New York as a source of identity formation and social status for youth. Despite its growing prominence in youth culture, little academic research exists into the impact

of hip hop programs. In 2010, a pilot study of a four month free hip-hop dance program for 11-16 year olds demonstrated promising results in terms of promoting youth well-being.<sup>7</sup> The youth reported gains in self-confidence and participation in physical activity, as well as improved physical health, shyness, mood, and relationships. Understanding how programs and activities can have a positive influence on promoting health, mental wellness, and resiliency is essential to promote a healthy transition to adulthood.

In 2016, a community-academic partnership was formed between Unity and the University of Toronto, Department of Physical Therapy to explore Unity participants' views on the nature of their engagement in the Unity dance program, understand their perspectives of the program, and perceived influence on their physical, social and emotional well-being through artistic expression in hip-hop and break dance art forms.



## 2.0 STUDY OVERVIEW

A qualitative descriptive design was employed using semi-structured, face-to-face focus groups which encouraged participants to share their perspectives on the Unity dance program. Focus groups elicit dynamic conversations and promote increased sharing of personal life stories and experiences, potentially revealing a plethora of unique perspectives rather than a consensus of opinions.<sup>12, 13</sup>

The research objectives addressed in this study were:

- to explore participants' views on the nature of their engagement in the Unity program,
- to understand participants' perspectives of the program,
- to examine the perceived influence of the program on participants' physical, social and emotional well-being through artistic expression in hip-hop and breakdance art forms.

Focus groups were held between January and May, 2016 at four sites which included:

- Art Starts at Yorkdale Mall,
- Rightfoot Dance Studio,
- Don Montgomery Community Centre,
- Free-After-Three Program at Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO).

All four sites were located in Toronto, Ontario, a large urban city with a population of 2.79 million.<sup>14</sup> These sites are well established in the community and were selected for their diversity, representativeness and willingness to participate.

Approval of the ethics protocol was granted by the Research Ethics Board from the University of Toronto prior to study commencement.

Youth, between the ages of 14 and 27, who attend the Unity dance program at four of the eleven community sites were invited to participate in this study. For the purposes of the study, youth was defined as any individual in their teens or twenties. Youth were excluded if they were unable or unwilling to provide informed consent, or were unable to speak and understand English. One to three weeks prior to each focus group, an artist educator informed Unity participants about the study and how to sign up. On the day of each focus group, participants were given a consent form outlining the study's purpose and objectives and their role in the study. Participants provided written informed consent to attend the focus group and have their responses used as data. A researcher who was facilitating the focus group provided a verbal summary of the study, explained participants could withdraw at any point and informed participants regarding confidentiality safeguards. Participants were provided a light meal and \$10 gift card following study participation.

The four focus groups included 27 participants (81% male). Their ages ranged from 14 to 27 years, and they had participated in Unity on average 2.7 years (range 6 months to seven years). The focus groups were 30-60 minutes in duration, and were conducted by two researchers in a quiet area of the Unity dance program space. One researcher facilitated the discussion and one collected field notes regarding non-verbal communication in order to increase the study's analytical rigor. Each focus group discussion was audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, de-identified and accuracy checked by the researchers who were present at the focus group. Descriptive content analysis was used to analyze the transcribed focus group data utilizing the frameworks of Hsieh and Shannon<sup>15</sup> and Braun and Clarke.<sup>16</sup> As a group, researchers used a consensus approach to manually code to identify key emergent themes.

### 3.0 KEY FINDINGS

All focus group participants revealed similar perceptions about their experiences. Five themes emerged from the discussions. These included the importance and value placed on;

- Belonging to and identifying with the Unity community
- The cool and creative culture of break dancing
- The personal experience of self-growth and maturity
- The enjoyment of body movement
- Access to space that was free and safe

#### Perspectives of Unity Dancers about Their Experiences



<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Welcoming and caring space</li> <li>• Inclusion of newcomers</li> <li>• Free of judgment</li> <li>• Creates lasting friendships</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Draws people with similar mindsets and values together</li> <li>• Positive setting contradicts negative stereotypes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Express emotions, develop discipline, enhance confidence</li> <li>• Artistic educators act as mentors</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enhances youths' physical well-being</li> <li>• Motivating and fulfilling activity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Open and free services</li> <li>• Desire for more geographic locations &amp; increased program availability throughout summer</li> </ul>
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## ***Belonging to and Identifying with the Unity Community***

Program participants placed considerable emphasis on the positive, family-like atmosphere created by Unity. The welcoming and caring Unity culture allowed for inclusion of newcomers and the ability for self-expression that was free of judgment. As one participant explained “...*Within the sessions I can be myself, and people accept you for who you are; doesn't matter how weird or crazy your thoughts are.*”(P9)

Success in Unity's ability to create this sense of community was supported by the structured, consistent nature of the program with sessions offered every week. “*Being surrounded by a group of people who have a similar mindset and similar like goals as well...that you see on a constant weekly basis...Just them being around you is very helpful, just because it's something that's set in your schedule, set in your routine.*” (P5)

The program helped participants to create a social circle outside the actual classes adding to the sense of belonging to and identifying with a community.

*“The more I went into Unity and the more comfortable I was, I thought, ‘Oh you know these people are cool to hang out with, and I want to get to know them outside the session.’ And I started to hangout with people of the session ... it feels good to solidify your social circle, and you can do other stuff than just dancing.” (P9)*

## ***Cool and Creative Culture of Break Dancing***

Many individuals reported that they joined the Unity dance program because they were intrigued by the aesthetics and uniqueness of breakdancing: “*I started dancing because I saw someone do a freeze and it was pretty neat.*” (P4) Most participants explained they were originally drawn to the breakdance art form due to the “cool factor” of hip-hop culture, rather than the goal of increasing their fitness level.



The creative nature of the breakdance culture appealed to participants' artistic individuality. Participants explained the appeal of breakdance as an art: *"You're creating something that's specifically yours, and it comes from you. You can't really do that with like a bench press."* (P14). Another participant said: *"In my opinion breaking is like you should treat it as an art form, but you should train as an athlete"*. (P22)

There appeared to be a duality to breakdancing in terms of prestige and stigma. The Unity program provided participants with social capital and a degree of prestige associated with dance and belonging which was often referred to a "cool." Some participants mentioned they were aware of a perceived stigma to breakdance in some parts of society, contrary to the positive atmosphere and standing they experienced within Unity. *"People think about breaking*

*negatively, and it's kind of a bad influence on us. The people that want to push this dance not only as competitors, but showing the positive things about b-boying and breaking.” (P21)*

Experienced participants explained that this negative connotation associated with hip-hop culture is a key motivator for distributing their wealth of knowledge of the art form to other participants in the dance sessions. Participants refer to this as the “*each one, teach one*” mentality. As one participant described: “*Hip-hop doesn't need more winners, it needs more leaders...just to keep hip-hop as positive and more towards the youth. We need more leaders to initiate what needs to be done as a community.*” (P21)

### ***Self-growth and Maturity***

Participants spoke about how they matured and experienced self-growth through dance and through their interactions with the artistic educators.

Under the guidance of the artistic educators, youth appeared to create a framework within which to learn positive ways to express their stress, develop discipline, and enhance their confidence. Participants found that dance, more than other types of physical activity, was a positive outlet through which they could move in ways that allowed them to express what they were feeling: “I think dancing is one of those things where if I come in with like a negative mindset, if I'm not feeling great, even if I don't dance too much... I can leave and I feel good. I feel mellow.” (P1)

In addition to participants learning positive ways of expressing their stress, many youth described dance as a way to develop confidence. They also found these attributes to be transferable to their lives outside of the Unity dance program.



As one individual explained: *“For a while I wasn’t really confident speaking in front of groups, or really communicating with people. But I found that through this dance, I was able to get that voice and gain that confidence to just start talking to people in general.”* (P19)

### **Role Models**

Unity artist educators acted as role models during and after the dance sessions. Participants expressed high regard for the Unity artist educators. They appreciated their breakdance skills and knowledge, and their ability to provide guidance and mentorship of participants both on and off the dance floor. Many described the Unity artist educators as “supportive,” “caring,” and encouraging the development of leadership among participants; “[A Unity artist educator] is a very good leader and with that it kind of makes other people want to be good leaders, so it’s kind of a chain reaction...” (P21)

## **Body Movement**

Breakdance provided participants with an opportunity to enhance their physical well-being through a motivating and fulfilling activity. Many agreed physical activity is an “added bonus” of their art form, rather than the primary objective. They described dance as a motivator to maintain fitness and used it as a means of weight control. One participant explained, “I feel like it also contributed to my feeling of being healthy. If I dance, I take it as not only communicating with other people or expressing myself, but also as a physical challenge.” (P9)

Many participants observed that breakdance can be associated with injuries. A participant of Unity who has a background in physical fitness said: *“One thing that I feel everyone wants or one thing I feel that Unity would do better with is like maybe if [Unity] taught classes on how to prevent injury and treat injury...I’m trying to teach people how to stretch and stuff.”* (P5)

## **Access to Space**

In addition to the health, friends, community, and passion that motivate participants to continue in the Unity dance program, many individuals reported that the free services provided by Unity were unique and made the program easily accessible to them. “Like, I come here just because it’s a free space. There aren’t that many spaces in the city where you can just do this anymore.” (P3)

Participants had mixed opinions about the program’s geographical locations and availability during the summer. They explained that many people have to travel from more suburban areas to get to the larger city center: “There’s no practice spots in my area, but it’s still kinda far. And I was in grade 9 at the time, so [my parents] didn’t like me travelling that far

and by myself.” (P2) Participants described difficulty finding access to practice space when the program closed down in the summer.

All individuals in the focus groups discussed how the Unity dance program provides them with a safe, positive environment to express their art form. Without Unity, many individuals would not have had this opportunity. They were respectful of their peers, and they all mentioned that Unity is a fun environment.

#### **4.0 CONCLUSIONS**

This paper contributes to our understanding of the impact of the Unity break-dance program on youth. The study shows that youth who participate in Unity gained acceptance, confidence and a sense of belonging to a community. The impact of the program appears to be associated with the dedicated artistic educators, the structure and constancy of weekly classes, the free and accessible safe space and the cool artistic nature of the program that promotes individuality and self-expression.

Break dancing as a component of hip hop has emerged as one of the more prominent and prestigious youth subcultures. Unity with the structure, safe spaces, free access and trained, committed artist educators capitalizes on the movement to help youth meet their potential. As one participant summarized, *“It’s lots of fun, I meet all kinds of crazy cool people, who give me all kinds of different skills... It’s only good that’s ever come out of Unity for me.”* (P17)

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