

To the Beat of Your Own Drum



A collaboration of the Syracuse University Early Education and Child Care Center with Etse Nyadezar with funding from Partners for Art Education.



This grant allowed us to begin an exploration in music, an area we had yet to investigate. Since this was such a new area for us the initial six hours of planning time allowed both the artist and the staff to find out more about each others levels of expertise and styles of teaching and learning. In a preliminary visit Etse came for a whole class circle time, he shared facets of the Ghanaian culture as he told us about symbols on the drums and shared a pourquoi story from Ghana.

- Etse came once a week for eight weeks. Each visit consisted of a training and planning time prior to time with children. During that time Etse would teach Julie new rhythms. They would also discuss sequencing and timing of the lesson for children. We established a core group who met with Etse for thirty minutes. After that children revolved in and out in a more informal way. Some weeks this was followed by a whole class circle. Finally, Julie and Etse used the last period of time to reflect. Julie's commitment to learning drumming was very important and has enabled her to absorb a lot of information in a short time.





- The core group consisted of children who had shown strong interest in our independent drumming sessions prior to Etse's visits. It was interesting to note that Etse's presence impacted on the dynamic and make up of the group. Children seemed to recognize that something exciting was going to happen with each class. They were enthusiastic and attentive throughout each part of the lesson.



- Culture and music were intertwined for children in each lesson. Etse called on memories of his own childhood to find songs, chants, and stories that would be successful in each visit. He used Che Che Kule, a traditional chant for children as the warm up exercise for each session. Pieces of Ghanaian culture came to life for our children as they internalized songs and movements. Etse's style was very personal and warm. Each child felt that he was talking and working with him/her. His ability to include life in Ghana in all his stories and songs brought extra richness to our times together.



- This was followed by Pisco, which introduced children to the call and response format. While Pisco was a song, the call-response format became a common structure in our drumming class.



- In spite of the brief nature of this residency, Etse was able to expose us to nine different rhythms. Some became familiar favorites and others were too complex given our lack of experience. Two rhythms were part of a basic set which we revisited each session. Two others were the rhythms for a complex dance which children began to learn.



This dance was based upon a Ghanaian story that Etse called, "Nakele." It was a story about a little girl who wanders away from her home, and her parents and village all go calling for her. As with so many traditional stories this story had a strong didactic element.



- We found that the Nakele dance was too complex in its entirety. We changed course and began teaching the children discrete segments of the dance, which we had fun naming, to help us remember them.

- We found that children were highly motivated to bring their newly learned rhythms to the whole class. It was also a way for us to observe children's progress. During these whole group circle times, Julie and the core group would play the basic Kpatsa rhythm as Etse would teach the class new steps in the Nakele dance. One step included flapping our elbows and moving our feet. We identified it by walking "one, two, three" and then flapping "chicken, chicken, chicken". Pretty soon you would hear, "One, two, three, chicken, chicken, chicken," as children walked down the hall, washed their hands, sat at the lunch table, etc.
- Circle time was also a time to reinforce drumming patterns using the floor or our bodies.



- We also felt that children needed to see what a dance looked like as a whole. Fortunately, the daughter of one of our teachers was participating in African dance in her high school. One day she was able to come and share both her music and a performance with the children. This enabled children to see how the steps we were learning would one day become a whole dance.



- After the core group met, drumming was opened to all children. During the next hour Etse and Julie would continue to play in a corner of our gross motor area as children were drawn to the beat and rhythm of drums and shakers. Children found that each drum had its own sound and personality.



- Not only were preschoolers called by the vibrant sounds, toddlers were also intrigued! At first they played their coffee cans in their own room but pretty soon three children came over with their teacher. Soon the whole group was joining us for a portion of each session.





- As we moved through the residency its effects became evident. Children were talking about drumming at home, and bringing their own instruments. Even parents began talking to us about their drumming experiences, they also let us know that children were singing the chants and spontaneously dancing at home. We also found children going to the drum corner independently. Both in class and at circle time the language of pattern became familiar to children. We extended exposure to patterns by adding clapping patterns to familiar songs.

- In our center we hope to find ways for each child to truly shine. This grant allowed some children to connect with passion to an expressive medium. There is always joy in those unexpected connections when a usually quiet child remains for more than an hour carefully watching each of Etse's movements, listening to the rhythm and working at it until she could play it herself.



We were surprised to discover that many of our most persistent drummers were children we perceived as "the quiet ones." Over and over, they gravitated to the drumming corner, sometimes through invitation and sometimes by choice.

In addition to Etse's drumming session, Julie offered an open drumming session one day a week. This allowed children to take elements they had learned from Etse and use them to become a basis for rhythms they invented. It also allowed children for whom drumming strongly resonated to take ownership of and delve deeper into the magic and discipline of drums. It was at a session like this where we came up with a drum rhythm for "Miss Mary Mack" and brought it to circle.

In our sessions prior to Etse's residency children loved to create their own "patterns." At the time this meant drumming in any sequence that appealed to them. It fell to the teacher to extract the pattern and identify it for the children to repeat. Towards the end of Etse's residency during open drum sessions it became apparent that children understood the concept of patterns and they could create, identify, and maintain rhythms on their own.



- The weather was with us and we were able to celebrate Etse's residency on the last day by turning the Nakele Dance into a parade and taking it out onto the playground to share with toddlers. We said farewell to Etse with one of our favorite songs, "Funga Alafia." We spent the last hour with an open outdoor session.

This year we were able to have one teacher work intensely with Etse. She has become comfortable with a half dozen rhythms. She has words and movements to four chants and dances. She has learned about the drum head and the sounds that can be made from different parts of it and with different parts of the hand. She had the opportunity to see how the artist made decisions. She continues drumming with children, still feeling tentative, but feeling that her repertoire has grown measurably.

Next year we would like to include more teachers in the process of working with the artist. We would also like children to build upon their ability to recognize patterns and to create their own.