



# HEALING HARP & RESTORATIVE DRUMMING

A PILOT PROJECT AT **GRENVILLE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL**

By Nancy Bennett, Principle, Grenville Elementary School

We live in the Age of Anxiety. For many children, parents, teachers, EAs and principals, anxiety and stress frame much of our daily reality. Studies point to anxiety as the root of depression, dis-engagement, autism spectrum and myriad other conditions. We all know and live the numbers.

**A**t Grenville Elementary School, we have begun to address the matter of anxiety and stress through an innovative pilot project called 'Healing Harp & Restorative Drumming' which places Mindfulness Training at the center of its practice.

The project takes place one morning a week and consists of three modalities:

- drumming circles for groups of 4-6 students;
- one-on-one harp classes which include breathing exercises and Vibroacoustic Harp Therapy; and
- Tai-Chi, which takes place in the school gymnasium for the entire student body.

The students taking part in the drum circles and harp classes are referred by the principal and staff for a variety of learning or behavioral challenges.

Mindfulness Training, and its application within the context of this project, is defined as the practice of opening, whole-bodily, to this moment of experiencing. The children are instructed to sit up straight, feel the breath moving in and out of their bodies; to open fully to Seeing, Hearing, Taste, Touch, Smell and Feeling and to watch the rising and falling of thoughts. Depending upon their capacity, they are invited to look into how anger, boredom, frustration or happiness are physically experienced within their bodies.

Within the context of drum circles, the children are encouraged to work together to create a dynamic and creative environment. Hands-on rhythmic exercises and drum patterns develop a variety of physical, social and cognitive skills. The sonic space encourages expression and freedom that is naturally found in drum circles. Mindfulness is used to create the cohesion necessary for a positive and rewarding group experience.

The harp sessions are designed around the particular needs, abilities and skills of the individual child. The very nature of the harp is soothing and invites pleasing experimentation. For children with complex needs, the harp can be tuned in such a way (pentatonic mode) as to produce immediate calming results with a minimum of technical skill. The Vibroacoustic Harp Therapy component of this work is an energy therapy with a proven record of success for children on the autism spectrum (please see [www.vibroacousticharptherapy.ca](http://www.vibroacousticharptherapy.ca) for further information). It is not the intention of the harp modality to create 'harpists' but to use the instrument as a medium of body and mind connection.

Mindfulness Training is at the heart of the Tai-Chi component of the project. This all-school activity is designed to embody the basic principal of Mindfulness - that each individual lives in This Moment and This Moment contains all possibilities - that no one can be defined by just one state of being or one state of thought.

**So, what does this actually look like?**

Here is how a recent session of Tai-Chi unfolded:

The children and staff came in from mid-morning outdoor recess and filed into the gym where they found the two instructors sitting silent and cross-legged at the front of the gym. Responding to this expectation of silence, they were, in turn silent. During the three to four minutes it took for everyone to find a spot on the floor, there was no sound. Once settled, a small gong was struck three times and, with few words, the children and staff were guided through several minutes of breathing exercises to calm and center them. Standing up, everyone was guided through eight basic Tai-Chi movements - all performed in silence. Following this, the children were invited to find a space on the floor while the instructors moved a harp and djembe (African hand drum) to the center of the gym. The children were guided through the basics of sitting-up straight, opening to breath, seeing, hearing, and awareness of sensations and then calming music was performed on harp and drum. After experiencing the quietness and dignity of the session, everyone was invited to take this awareness back to their classroom and throughout the day. The session ended with three strikes on the gong and a silent departure.

## Healing Harp & Restorative Drumming



All photos submitted by Nik Schnell,  
Teacher, Grenville Elementary School



One teacher observed: "The time following Tai-Chi is the only opportunity in the week when I am able to present advanced concepts because then I have the children's entire attention". Feedback from parents has been equally positive and supportive. One parent wrote:

*"Dear Mrs. Bennett,*

*I would like to thank you for including my son in the Grenville Elementary School Harp & Drum program. This program has not only benefited him musically, but he now has more confidence in himself and is proud of what he has accomplished. I am very grateful that my son has this opportunity and I hope that he will be included in this program in the years to come."*

As a school community, we are seeing that children are transferring what they learn in the project to the reality of their own lives with a resulting reduction of anxiety and stress. Students have become calmer and better able to attend to the work at hand - allowing the focus of our teaching to be on student success rather than on correcting negative behavioral issues. We fully endorse this as a model for use by other schools. ■

Grenville Elementary School is one of the smallest schools in the Sir Wilfrid Laurier School Board. The Sir Wilfrid Laurier School Board is the third largest English school board of the Province of Québec. Its territory comprises the administrative regions of Laval, Lanaudière, and the Laurentides, spanning over 35 000 square kilometers. The student population is over 13,500 students, attending classes in 26 elementary schools and 9 secondary schools and 5 Adult Education and Vocational Training centres

### AUTHOR BIO

Nancy Bennet has been the principal of GES for nine years. She graduated in 1971 from McGill University in Montreal, Québec and began her teaching career in Hull, Québec for the Western Québec School Board. After getting married in the summer of 1972 she moved with her husband to Prince Edward Island and returned to Québec in November of that year. She was engaged by the Laurentian School Board in January of 1973 and taught at Laurentian Regional High School for a period of eight years. She interrupted her teaching career to have a family but stayed active in the educational field during this period. In 1998 she re-entered the teaching field and taught at Grenville Elementary School where she was Head Teacher for ten years. In 2008 she became Principal of this school and currently maintains this position.

In 2012 she was extremely honored to be awarded Canada's Outstanding Principals Award by the Learning Partnership for her vision, dedication and leadership.

### INSTRUCTOR BIO

Ian Hepburn holds Piano Performance and Piano Pedagogy diplomas from the Royal Conservatory of Music. He has taught piano and harp privately for more than forty years. Ian is a certified Vibroacoustic Harp Therapy practitioner at Hawkesbury & District General Hospital in Hawkesbury, Ontario. Contact: [i.hepburn@outlook.com](mailto:i.hepburn@outlook.com).

### INSTRUCTOR BIO

William Laurin has studied music at Vanier College and, most recently, at Carleton University. William brings his love of drumming and its potential for personal expression to his teaching. His engaging rapport with students is contagious and makes lessons a joy. He looks forward to sharing this with participants in the drum circles. He has toured throughout Canada, the United States and France and pursues an active performance career.

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