Kulu Mele African Dance & Drum Ensemble
Arts Education Programs for Children
Philadelphia, PA • kulumele.org
Evaluative Assessment Report

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About Kulu Mele’s Arts Education Programming

Kulu Mele African Dance & Drum Ensemble is a fifty-year-old (1969-2019) performing arts troupe based in Philadelphia, PA. It is the mission of Kulu Mele to present, preserve and perpetuate the dance and music of West Africa and the African Diaspora.

Kulu Mele reflects on the idea of Sankofa. Sankofa is a word in the Twi language of Ghana. It translates as “go back and get it,” and it represents the importance of reflecting on the past in order to build a successful future. Sankofa is symbolized by an adrinka – a Ghanian/West African symbol – of a bird whose head is turned backward while its feet face forward. The Sankofa adrinka can be seen on clothing and jewelry, and in architecture.

Kulu Mele embraces looking back in order to move forward. Kulu Mele means “the voice of our ancestors” in Yoruba. Kulu Mele’s arts education programs harness the ages-old cultural traditions of West Africa in order to help young people reach the fullest potential of their development, physically, ethically, intellectually and culturally.

Kulu Mele is committed to teaching and learning multidimensional excellences in African and African Diasporic art forms. For half a century, Kulu Mele has been an incubator and learning laboratory for the development of much of the African dance and drum culture in the city of Philadelphia.

Omo means children in the Yoruba language. Omo Kulu Mele (OKM) refers to any children's educational programming, performance, performance company and children's educational programming that Kulu Mele sponsors. OKM programs train students to perform traditional West African dance and drumming, as well as hip-hop, which descends from West African movement and rhythms. OKM also educates children about the cultural, historical, social, geographic and geopolitical contexts of the movement and rhythms that they learn.

OKM offers a range of educational programs that serve thousands of students annually.

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The programs provide arts and cultural education with a focus on African and African Diasporan history and culture, otherwise not available in schools; contribute to students’ physical education and health; help students to develop self-esteem and pride; build critical literacy and historical awareness; and improve social skills through engagement in collective and ensemble practice. For students of African heritage, OKM programs are also opportunities to explore their cultures of origin. For other students, they are intercultural investigations.

OKM’s educational programs are participatory and interactive. OKM’s team of performance and educational artist-educators use a variety of differentiated teaching methods in order to fulfill the vision and goals of the program. Almost all OKM programs are delivered to families who live and learn in Philadelphia’s most underserved neighborhoods, community spaces and schools.

**Background**

The purpose of this report is to study the impacts and outcomes of OKM instructional practice. It is also to use the study results to refine OKM arts education programs.

With generous support from Philadelphia Cultural Fund’s (PCF) Youth Arts Enrichment Program, four Kulu Mele teaching artists taught two different programs for one hour each week, for twelve weeks per semester, for two semesters (Fall and Spring), for 24 weeks total, during the 2018-2019 academic year, at Philadelphia’s Community Partnership School (CPS). CPS is an independently operated, 501(c)3 nonprofit school with a mission to provide high-quality education to pre-K through elementary-age children who are members of low-wealth, low-income families. CPS is located in one of the most economically disadvantaged zip codes in Pennsylvania.

In one residency workshop, a mixed group of 21 third through fifth-graders spent the school year learning traditional West African dance or drumming. In a concurrent workshop, a mixed group of 21 students studied hip-hop. Kulu Mele music director John Wilkie provided West African drum instruction and live accompaniment for Kulu Mele dance captain Ama Schley, who taught West African dance. Kulu Mele dancer, drummer, and hip-hop artist Yusuf Young taught hip-hop to recorded music.

Kulu Mele artistic director Dorothy Wilkie provided curricular supervision, alternating between both West African and hip-hop residencies. Wilkie also observed students in both classes to ensure rigor and to support the students’ development of technique. In addition, Wilkie documented the students’ progress from week to week, in accordance with a program evaluation and assessment protocol. (See attachments.)

At the end of the residency, the participating students presented an in-school finale performance for an audience of their classmates, teachers, administrators and

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families. Their Kulu Mele teaching artists and other Kulu Mele company performers joined them in the finale performance.

**Evaluation and Assessment**

My role was to assess and evaluate the learning process and the teacher integration/support provided to CPS. This document represents a summative evaluation process that will inform improvements to Kulu Mele's arts education programs across the board. Findings have been compiled using written documentary support compiled by Dorothy Wilkie, through interviews with Wilkie and CPS teachers (who supervised their classrooms) and by my own observations at select CPS residency activities.

As a component of OKM’s dedication to enhancing its educational programming, Kulu Mele has provided educational supplementation and support to its year-long residency with CPS for the 2018-2019 school year. Kulu Mele has assessed the success of its program via this program evaluation, including its overall curriculum and student performance knowledge, in the hope that it will drive instruction, curriculum and teaching strategies to improve future OKM programming.

**Formative and Summative Assessments**

Kulu Mele has worked in residence at CPS for one semester per year for more than five years. With PCF funding, Kulu Mele expanded (doubled) its CPS residency for the most recently completed school year (2018-2019), with the goal of generating even greater and longer lasting positive impacts for participating students.

The following are the findings and evaluative assessments of this expanded residency. I have developed data that documents CPS students’ improved understanding, comprehension and appreciation of traditional and contemporary African performative traditions and contemporary expressions thereof; as well as participating students' personal and social growth in relation to Kulu Mele's residency.

Kulu Mele teaching artists utilize a combination of formative and summative assessments during their residencies. Formative assessments are used each time students entered the classroom. Some examples of formative assessments utilized are class discussions, reflections, group presentations and outside research on ethnographic topics relating to the dance and music. Call and response techniques for memorization of information; and movement practice, have long been a part of Kulu Mele’s practice, with special emphasis on Omo Kulu Mele learning outcomes. The idea of call and response is used as a teaching tool from the OKM teaching method.

The summative assessment is the preparation and presentation of the culminating

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performance. Students were responsible for a variety of information including cultural
information on the movement and rhythms; historical information/context; a working
movement vocabulary; the understanding of the connection between the music and the
movement; the ways in which music communicates ideas; and choreographic elements
of placement, movement and purpose within a dance presentation. (See OKM
curricular goals/results)

**Broad Learning Outcomes**

OKM’s broad learning outcomes are the basic competencies that Kulu Mele would like
to see evidence of at the culmination of its residences. My research found that the
degree to which students succeed in these competencies is directly related to teacher
participation during residency activities, as well as teacher reinforcement during class
time when Kulu Mele is not in residence.

I was able to establish that students achieve greater success with regard to their Kulu
Mele learnings, if CPS teachers support Kulu Mele’s learning objectives in their
classrooms, when Kulu Mele is not in residence.

**PA Department of Education Standards for the Arts and the Humanities**

At all residencies, Kulu Mele teaching artists observe, assess and document students' progress and development according to Kulu Mele’s own curricular standards, which were developed to support the Pennsylvania Department of Education’s (DOE) Standards Alignment System, and which incorporate themes from the Pennsylvania DOE Physical Education requirements and Arts and Humanities requirements. CPS will separately assess the success of Kulu Mele’s residency programs according to its own necessary and appropriate curricular standards as set forth by governing jurisdictions including the Pennsylvania Board of Education.

The Academic Standards for the Arts and Humanities describe what students should know and be able to do at the end of grades 3, 5, 8 and 12 in the visual and performing arts and the understanding about humanities context within the arts. The arts include dance, music, theatre and visual arts. The arts and the humanities are interconnected through the inclusion of history, criticism and aesthetics. In addition, the humanities include literature and language, philosophy, social studies and world languages. The areas encompassed in the humanities such as jurisprudence, comparative religions and ethics are included among other standards documents. The interconnected arts and humanities areas are divided into these standards categories: 1) Production, Performance and Exhibition of Dance, Music, Theatre and Visual Arts; 2) Historical and Cultural Contexts; 3) Critical Response; and 4) Aesthetic Response.

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Page 5 – Kulu Mele’s evaluative assessment of its arts education programs
The Academic Standards for the Arts and Humanities define the content for planned instruction that will result in measurable gains for all students in knowledge and skills and provide a basis of learning for continued study in the arts. The unifying themes of production, history, criticism and aesthetics are common to each area of study within the Academic Standards in the Arts and Humanities. Dance Education is a kinesthetic art form that satisfies the human need to respond to life experiences through movement of the physical being. Music Education is an aural art form that satisfies the human need to respond to life experiences through singing, listening and/or playing an instrument. (Please see the attachment of PA Academic Standards for Arts and Humanities for the actual standards.) I have documented that 95% of students who participated in Kulu Mele’s 2018-2019 residency at CPS, reached proficiency in Arts and Humanities standards.

**Teacher Integration/Curricular Support**

This past year, CPS educators received information on the names, ethnic groups, and regions of the African continent of the peoples whose cultures were represented in the dance and music that Kulu Mele taught to CPS students. Supplemental materials were shared with teachers that include readings, books and online resources that reinforced and gave background to Kulu Mele’s lessons. According to Beth Vaccaro, the director of curriculum and instruction at CPS, these supplemental materials provided important support to CPS teachers, who in turn were better able to support Kulu Mele’s objectives, beyond the times when Kulu Mele teaching artists were in residence.

**Overall Successes of the Program**

Students of CPS were successful in achieving more than 90% proficiency in their Kulu Mele broad learning goals, 80% in their OKM curricular goals and 90% of PA Standards for Arts and Humanities in Dance and Music. All of us at Kulu Mele believe empirically that engaging with the music and dance of diverse cultures leads to more empathetic communities of learners and people.

**Overall Opportunities for Improvement**

As a result of this study, Kulu Mele will endeavor to increase teacher integration (active participation) in its residencies; and to further infuse culturally relevant content into the curricula of the schools in which Kulu Mele works (expanding beyond the residency curriculum itself). At CPS and in other learning communities in which Kulu Mele has worked, Kulu Mele’s residency programs have become essential as culmination activities related to cultural units on Africa. This gives opportunity for cross curricular, linear and vertical alignment with curricular diversity and developmental goals. These goals can be especially crucial for African American students who have
a cultural and linear connection to the performative arts that Kulu Mele teaches.

Examples of places for improvement:
- Teacher training and curriculum development/implementation
- Professional development on African cultural integration, unit development, and
- Educator buy-in; participation in dance or drum workshops by teachers, parents, community members, and stakeholders.

If the commitment of CPS was that the OMK curriculum could center around a cross-curricular unit on Africa, it would make the experience more meaningful and holistic for learners and prove to be essential in making a more powerful impact on students.

**Final Thoughts**

Young black and brown children are a particularly precious audience for Kulu Mele's arts education programming, because of their ancestral connection to Africa. Their participation in Kulu Mele's programming supports Kulu Mele's mission to preserve and perpetuate West African performative traditions, both now and in the future, as they grow up.

Kulu Mele's Omo Kulu Mele arts education programs for children train the hearts, minds, bodies, and souls of both young people of color and their dominant culture classmates. All who participate are trained to become culturally competent and artistically curious Philadelphians. So trained, they will engage their ancestry, history, culture, individual humanity, and collective conscience as they move and make noise and find their way forward, in life and in art.

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Three key OKM principles and teaching methods:

Connecting students to generational traditions of practice, perpetuated within culturally-held educational structures. Inspired by the voices of its ancestors, Kulu Mele African Dance & Drum Ensemble preserves and presents the traditional dance and music of Africa and the African Diaspora, and celebrates contemporary African American culture. Kulu Mele means voice of the ancestors in the Guro language of the Ivory Coast. Giving voice to the ancestors symbolically and literally means that in all things we should remember the struggles and successes of people who came before us. It is the idea that we are all here for a reason, and that it is only right to acknowledge the people that have worked and sacrificed for the well-being that we have today. As educators of African Diasporan culture, Kulu Mele feels that it is imperative that our students know and understand the stories of people that have come before us. African dance and drum traditions are taught within historical and social contexts, and with a sense of the meaning and significance of the practice into which learners enter.

Value-based learning. Ethics, values, character, respect, and dignity are integral to the traditions that Kulu Mele conveys. Kulu Mele realizes that when young people have a positive perspective of who they are as it relates to their ancestry, they will reflect a more positive attitude to how they perceive the world. Malcolm X also discusses this idea further by saying that to the extent that one’s perspective about their ancestry becomes negative, so will their potential perspective, and thus for many will become limited by their own perceived circumstance. The educational work of Kulu Mele becomes essential insofar as Kulu Mele presents ideas about African culture that correlate with respect, dignity and cultural diversity.

Growing awareness of specific African and African American art and cultural histories. When experiencing and studying the dance of a group of people, students (and audiences) learn how particular communities of people live and what they value, here and now as well as in the past. They will begin to formulate a consciousness about the world as perceived by those ethnicities. They begin to realize that the world is not linear, and that there are multiple simultaneous experiences that occur in life. Students also have an opportunity to realize the connectivity that thrives among people of the African Diaspora. This connectivity is significant, especially for African American youth who often refuse any connection to the continent of Africa by way of the Diaspora. Their consequential connection to their ancestors’ enslavement in America creates a negative perception about who they really are or can become.

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OKM Integrated Holistic Educational Goals

OKM has several integrated goals that are not limited to the following:

● To support Kulu Mele’s mission to preserve and perpetuate West African and Diasporic arts and culture;
● To help children accomplish OKM’s curricular goals; (See curricular goals)
● To foster and support a higher quality of life for Philadelphia children whose families are economically disadvantaged;
● To help students experience the joy and exhilaration of actively participating in music and dance;
● To expand children’s worldviews; to train them to think, feel and act in new ways that broaden their scope of awareness (and experience);
● To nurture the development of their social and emotional skills;
● To help participating students to explore the artistic and cultural aspects of their cultures of origin;
● To investigate students personal, familial, ancestral and cultural histories;
● To enhance and develop students’ personal identities, self-esteem, feelings of belonging and inclusion, and sense of cultural and community pride;
● To promote and support cross-cultural investigations that contribute to their understanding and appreciation of their classmates and neighbors, individually and collectively;
● To develop communal dance and drumming that enhances participants’ teamwork, collaboration, cooperation, and attention to and respect for others’ personal space and physical safety;
● To develop coordination skills through drumming and dancing;
● To engage students where they live and learn, to create a comfortable (and therefore more receptive) learning environment.
### Omo Kulu Mele Broad Learning Outcomes

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Omo can at 98%</th>
<th>Know basic knowledge about the dance, and the name and location of the country in Africa where the dance originated.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Omo can at 100%</td>
<td>Distinguish the breaks, calls and music for each dance that they study.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Omo can at 100%</td>
<td>Identify the instruments in the Djembe ensemble.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Omo can at 100%</td>
<td>Present and know the string of African dance movements from entrance to exit.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Omo can at 100%</td>
<td>Know the choreographic elements of the performance, including spacing, phrasing and movement.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Omo can at 100%</td>
<td>Present a culminating performance in front of family, faculty and stakeholders.</td>
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### OKM Curricular Goals

| Omo can at 78% | Forms and Techniques | • Students will demonstrate their ability to use perceptual and movement skills in order to perform and respond to dance and music.  
• Students will learn how to behave in a performance environment.  
• Students will engage in physical activities that promote physical fitness and health. |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Omo can at 90% | Cultural History | • Students will explore and perform dances and drum rhythms from African cultural and social genres to increase their knowledge and appreciation of dance and music and its relationship to other significant components of human history and experience.  
• Students will explain the historical, cultural, and social context of an individual dance. |
| Omo can at 98% | Performance and Production | • Students will perform dance movements and repeat drum rhythms in order to understand the elements and principles of dance and music (energy/force, space, time, duration, intensity, style, rhythm).  
• Students will demonstrate their ability to express emotions, illustrate an action or story, or relate an experience through music and dance. |
| Omo can at 88% | Personal Development | • Students will develop personal and interpersonal skills through dance and music in order to work cooperatively and respectfully with others.  
• Students will explore how to embody and express the meanings and emotions of select movements and rhythms, and of dance and music in general. |