

A Very Special Event – Learning About the Steelpan Drum with Akini Gill

by Kaila Rochelle

As an outreach to his studies about teaching exceptional learners at New York University, Mr. Akini Gill presented four volunteer assemblies on Friday April 27th, 2012 at the Roy Campanella School. The school services students aged 14 - 21 years old with moderate to severe developmental disabilities. These disabilities include autism, multiple physical challenges, emotional challenges, and cognitive and severe learning disabilities. The aim of the assembly was to teach students about the steelpan drum and the musical culture of Trinidad and Tobago..

Mr. Gill provided differentiated instruction according to student levels and abilities. Over sixty students were able to come up on stage throughout the day and try out the steelpan drum. He instructed them in a clear, flexible, respectful manner and assessed the abilities of each student while assigning specific and appropriate musical tasks for each one to perform. Every student succeeded at their assignment. Mr. Gill showed great sensitivity to individual challenges. Some students played random notes, others were directed to play specific tones, phrases or complete folk tunes. Mr. Gill provided students with a variety of prompts. These included modeling, pointing and hand over hand instruction. He did an exemplary job at helping students live up to the moment.

Mr. Gill used musical examples on the steelpan drum to correlate with specific musical concepts. He cleverly used examples that students could recognize such as simple universal folk songs. Mr. Gill described the historical development of the steelpan drum from an instrument with just a few pitches to one with 29 pitches. He used a multi-sensory method to show the mathematical concept of few to many. In doing so, he incorporated core standards. Students viewed his motions to make the pitches, heard the pitches and some were able to count out the pitches.

Mr. Gill taught students about the musical culture of Trinidad and Tobago. He stressed that the development of the steelpan drum cannot be credited to any one person, but to many people. A globe was passed around the auditorium and staff helped students locate "Mr. Akini's" homeland. Additionally, when he asked students about the origins of the steelpan drum to reinforce the lesson, there were some students who eagerly raised their hands to respond.

The behavior of the students both in the audience and on stage was age appropriate. Students on stage patiently awaited their turn to play the steelpan drum. Mr. Gill was an excellent role model for the students. He demonstrated proper posture, wrist movement, and use of the tenor sticks. It was obvious that students on all levels of functioning felt proud of themselves. In addition, Mr. Gill was kind enough to have a few staff members try out the steelpan drum.

His lesson was tailored so that students were able to sing, clap, or tap out repeated rhythm patterns to "If You're Happy and You Know It". Students were invited to accompany Mr. Gill's beautiful steelpan pieces with other percussion instruments such as drums, rhythm sticks and tambourines. There was an intense level of student interest and involvement .

Mr. Gill improvised beautifully with one of our paraprofessionals, a pianist from the Caribbean. Our students from the Caribbean were singing familiar songs as both artists played together. Some students and staff danced.

A wonderful time was had by all.

[On behalf of the students and the staff of The Roy Campanella School](#), I would like to thank Mr. Akini Gill for giving our school a great appreciation for the steelpan drum and the musical traditions of Trinidad and Tobago. We hope he will return one day to treat us to more beautiful assemblies. His hard work was of great service to our school community.