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Article

Hip-Hop and Spoken Word Therapy in Urban School Counseling

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Abstract

This study involved a secondary analysis of data collected across the 2016–2017 academic year to determine the impact on students' social and emotional well-being of a new hip-hop lyricism course implemented by a school counselor. The new course introduced hip-hop and spoken word therapy into a specially designed classroom curriculum to meet the emotional and stress-coping needs of youth, allowing for improvements in the development of coping skills, emotional self-awareness, and self-image.

Keywords

emotions, hip-hop therapy, school counseling, social/emotional learning

Difficult social and emotional experiences are a common aspect of adolescence, particularly for urban youth who face a greater frequency of violence (Kliewer & Lepore, 2015) and loss (Smith, 2015). Adolescents report experiencing more emotional stress than any other age-group and face an increased risk for developing a range of social and emotional problems (Guo, Nguyen, Weiss, Ngo, & Lau, 2015; Lin & Yusoff, 2013). Adolescents are the most likely age-group to develop post-traumatic stress disorder, with data suggesting almost two thirds of adolescents experienced a traumatic event prior to the age of 17 (McLaughlin et al., 2013).

However, adolescents of color experience a more specific set of stressors. For African American youth, economic stress and discrimination have been identified as being significantly associated with internalizing symptoms (e.g., anxious/depressed, withdrawn, somatic complaints), while experiences of violence and depression have been associated with externalizing symptoms (e.g., delinquent/aggressive behaviors), both of which justify interventions to help African American adolescents develop effective coping strategies (Sanchez, Lambert & Cooley-Strickland, 2013). Research on Latinx adolescents in high school suggested that exposure to racial discrimination was associated with negative impacts on their coping efficacy (Sánchez et al., 2017). Santiago, Torres, Brewer, Fuller, and Lennon (2016) found that Latino adolescents experienced high levels of peer and academic stress and poverty-related stress as factors significantly associated with negative mood states, also stressing the need for improved coping repertoires.

Urban youth are also exposed to structural risk factors that impact behavior, including living in poverty, witnessing violence and drug use, and attending underresourced schools. Researchers have found such structural risk factors to be associated with higher levels of stress (Berg, Coman, & Schensul, 2009). Moreover, youth of mixed race/ethnicity are at an increased risk of developing mental health conditions (i.e., sadness/hopelessness and/or depressive levels) than youth of single race/ethnicity (Garcia, Hedwig, Hanson, Rivera, & Smith, 2019). Youth of color facing emotional stress show lower academic achievement than White youth (Bohrnstedt, Kitmitto, Ogut, Sherman, & Chan, 2015).

Ratts, Dekruyf, and Chen-Hayes (2007) posited that school counselors are responsible for exploring the various systems that oppress their students, specifically by considering how environmental factors hinder a student's ability to function highly in schools. Emdin (2016) stated that the forms of systemic oppression young people face lead to stress and trauma that often go unaddressed in schools. In light of the host of social and emotional challenges facing contemporary adolescents both inside and outside of school, there is a need to create culturally responsive outlets for emotional processing in urban schools. Therefore, this article explores the potential valuable role for the school counselor in using a culturally sensitive intervention to support student's navigation of difficult social and emotional experiences.

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Social and Emotional Well-Being

School counselors are responsible for building positive and safe school climates by ensuring that their efforts serve the academic, career, and social/emotional needs of all students (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2012). Amid school counselors' varying roles, attention to students' social/emotional health is paramount given its propensity to increase academic achievement (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). School-based counselors are often the first service providers for youth, particularly to address their social/emotional well-being (Taylor, Weissberg, Oberle, & Durlak, 2017).

A bevy of research explores the school counselor's role in supporting students' social/emotional development (Bowers, Lemberger-Truelove, & Brigman, 2017; Corcoran, Cheung, Kim, & Xie, 2017; Lemberger, Carbonneau, Selig, & Bowers, 2018). Lemberger, Selig, Bowers, and Rogers (2015) found that a cognitive, social, and self-management skills guidance curriculum increased Latinx students' executive functioning (e.g., emotional control, organization, task completion), connectedness to classmates, and academic functioning. Other research shows that student reports of high emotional engagement in high school (e.g., feeling part of the school community, caring about school, and enjoying classes) are predictive of higher grade point averages (Chase, Hilliard, Geldhof, Warren, & Lerner, 2014). A study on classroom emotional climate suggested that classroom environments that promote students' autonomy and expression of ideas are predictive of increased academic achievement over time (Reyes, Brackett, Rivers, White, & Salovey, 2012). Research also suggests that a student's specific pride in their cultural roots may be associated with academic achievement (Byrd & Chavous, 2009; Murry, Berkel, Brody, Miller, & Chen, 2009).

Cultural Considerations

Cultural considerations are of particular importance for school counselors when developing empathic understanding of students (MacCluskie, 2010). Research shows that when students feel their opinions are taken seriously, or that their emotions and experiences matter to others, they are better able to push through academic challenges (MacNeil, Prater, & Busch, 2009; Tucker, Dixon, & Griddine, 2010). Although attention to the social/emotional experiences of youth in schools is warranted, counseling interventions often fail due to lack of cultural responsiveness (Corrigan, Druss, & Perlick, 2014).

White communities are significantly more likely to receive counseling services than Black and brown communities (Broman, 2012; Young & Rabiner, 2015). Scholars suggest the dearth in access to counseling services is not due to the availability of counseling services as much as a lack of culturally responsive services, which may lead communities of color to perceive counselors and counseling as inauthentic (Lindsey & Marcell, 2012) and untrustworthy (Alvidrez, Snowden, & Kaiser, 2008). In exploring this lack of access both inside and outside of school, researchers point to how counselors' use of westernized counseling methodologies and lack of cultural sensitivity are potentially harmful to urban youth (Tao, Owen, Pace, & Imel, 2015; Williams, Greenleaf, Albert, & Barnes, 2014). The current study assesses a culturally responsive course facilitated by a school counselor to support students' social and emotional development.

Hip-Hop and Spoken Word Therapy

A few articles have explored the use of hip-hop as a culturally responsive counseling service in schools and other mental health settings (Elligan, 2004; Levy, Emdin, & Adjapong, 2018; Travis & Deepak, 2011; Tyson, 2002, 2003; Washington, 2018). Tyson (2002) engaged African American and Latinx youth in discussions of hip-hop music as a means to promote therapeutic dialogue, finding improvements in peer relations and preference for hip-hop-based counseling over traditional approaches. Tyson (2003) found that hip-hop and other music could provide African American and Latino adolescent clients with a safe platform to identify and discuss their emotions. Kobin and Tyson (2006) suggested that hip-hop therapy helps create genuine therapeutic relationships. Travis and Deepak (2011) highlighted hip-hop culture as a particular empowerment tool to engage youth in counseling sessions and support clients' disclosure of difficult emotions.

This research engendered hip-hop and spoken word therapy (HHSWT; Levy, 2012; Levy & Keum, 2014), an innovative approach to counseling in which students engage in counseling interventions through the process of writing, recording, and performing hip-hop music. HHSWT is grounded in established counseling theories including cognitive behavioral therapy and person-centered therapy, and couples with a bevy of hip-hop cultural practices, such as lyric writing as cognitive journaling, collaboration as role-play, hip-hop performance to bolster group dynamics, and the hip-hop mixtape to guide the counseling process. By rooting counseling tools in youth culture, students can engage in the evocation and analysis of previously undisclosed thoughts and feelings. Levy (2012) stressed that "the purpose is to assist the client in moving from living in an insecure world to living with a mindset of high self-esteem and authenticity devoid of cognitive distortion and denial of real self" (p. 221).

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Lyric Writing as Cognitive and Emotive Journaling

A salient aspect of HHSWT is the use of lyric writing, which melds homework assignments (Beck, 1963) with a more humanistic, emotion-focused processing (Greenberg, Elliott, & Lietaer, 1994). School counselors using HHSWT are encouraged to task students with lyric-based journal entries, where they can

process the emergence of specific difficult thoughts, feelings, and emotions outside of sessions. When students return for a subsequent session, they are then offered the chance to "check-in" and share what they have written throughout the week, and this guides the content of the session. School counselors are encouraged to actively listen to students' lyrics for underlying emotions and cognitions and ask follow-up questions about particular lyrics to further explore thoughts and feelings. Within hip-hop spaces, a song is deemed "real" or authentic when it paints a detailed picture of one's lived experience (Neal, 2012). Based on the cultural practice of ensuring the authenticity of one's lyrics, school counselors using HHSWT are charged with assisting students in refining their lyrics to more accurately speak to their lived experiences. For example, if a school counselor hears or sees lyrics that suggest a student feels unsupported by their family, then follow-up questions are warranted that gather details around this feeling to support the development of the verse. If a school counselor finds out that the student actually does have support in their lives that they may not be perceiving, then cognitive structuring can occur under the guise of supporting students to create more realistic, and authentic, lyrics.

Collaboration as Role-Play

Another intervention that HHSWT relies on is student collaboration, which includes the use of role-play, following the work of Bandura (1986, 1997). In hip-hop culture, collaboration requires that artists share distinct stories about the same concept to complete a cohesive song. When collaborating in hip-hop culture, artists engage in detailed discussions regarding the content of each of their verses, and how both individualized narratives can be used to construct a cohesive song. Through the use of role play as collaboration, students work in small groups, pairs, or with their school counselor to co-construct songs around emotional experiences to learn to analyze thoughts and feelings and develop solutions. For example, if two students are both struggling with a sibling relationship, school counselors can have them co-construct a song about that theme to both share and work through a difficult shared experience. Evidenced here are also elements of peer modeling from Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory. As part of the collaboration process, students may receive social feedback and learn from their peer's successes.

The Hip-Hop Cypher

HHSWT incorporates the use of hip-hop cyphers, defined as "highly codified yet unstructured practices where youth who identify with hip-hop culture exchange information in the form of raps or dance" (Levy, Emdin, & Adjapong, 2018, p. 2). Levy, Emdin, and Adjapong (2018) suggested that cyphers can be used in group counseling practice to establish group norms supportive of group cohesion. They also have argued that the creation of hip-hop cyphers in group counseling spaces enables clients to enact a series of predefined norms and/or rules of engagement that support emotional expression. These include (a) participants stand in a circle, (b) each member has an opportunity to share, (c) every voice is viewed as equal, (d) participants are praised when they share, and (e) support is provided in moments of discomfort (Levy et al., 2018). The hip-hop cypher is used in HHSWT to establish the environment necessary for students to share emotionally laden lyrics with their group members.

Mixtapes

In HHSWT, school counselors allow the acts of writing, recording, and performing emotionally themed hip-hop songs to guide the counseling process. Levy, Cook, and Emdin (2018) discussed the cultural importance of albums or mixtapes in hip-hop culture, highlighting that they have traditionally offered marginalized individuals and communities a platform to share complex, untold stories. Mixtape creation is humanistic in nature, given that all songs on the project are chosen solely by the creators and are based on what they deem most important. Specifically, Levy, Cook, and Emdin theorized that

> by undergoing a series of emotional discussions with their school counselor, which culminate in the creation of hip-hop music that details both their discussions and research, young people are offered the chance to build skills and knowledge of issues to promote their change and development. (p. 6)

Building upon the power and potential of hip-hop mixtapes, Levy, Cook, and Emdin recommended that school counselors partner with students to identify emotional themes they wish to discuss. Once themes are identified, school counselors support students as they work through researching, writing, and recording songs about their findings, with the ultimate aim of disseminating their work to the larger community through performance and/or an album release.

Pedagogy

For school counselors, establishing a culturally responsive environment for classroom guidance is imperative. HHSWT draws from reality pedagogy (RP), an approach to teaching and learning in urban schools designed to provide youth with the agency to actively engage in classrooms where they traditionally underperform (Emdin, 2010). The chief goal of RP is to acknowledge the varying standpoints of students in the classroom and use information gleaned from students as the point from which pedagogy is birthed. RP uses hip-hop culture and its focus on privileging voice to allow music and other forms of cultural expression. RP functions to provide teachers with a set of practical tools for meeting its goals, including cogenerative dialogues, coteaching, cosmopolitanism, context, content, and competition (Emdin, 2010). For example, cogenerative dialogues are a series of conversations educators have with a small group of students outside of the classroom to troubleshoot

issues in the classroom and cocreate interventions. School counselors using HHSWT in the classroom guidance setting might meet with a small group of students to discuss different emotional themes they believe the class would want to write about, or specific artists/music students would like to listen to or analyze as a group. Solutions found in cogenerative dialogues are then used in coteaching, where students are asked, as homework, to reimagine one of the school counselor's classroom guidance lesson plans, tailor it to the cultural worldviews of their peers, and then teach that lesson.

Purpose of the Study

This study involved a secondary analysis of preexisting data collected at an urban high school in the South Bronx across the 2016–2017 academic year. Specifically, the school counselor (also the author of this study) and the principal previously sought to determine the impact on students' social and emotional well-being of a new hip-hop lyricism course implemented by the school counselor. In the current study, the researcher reanalyzed the previously collected data set to answer different questions. The premise of the hip-hop lyricism course was that culturally appropriate counseling strategies and/or pedagogical frameworks rooted in hip-hop may increase students' level of comfort for engaging in self-reflection, emotional exploration, and accessing counseling services overall. Further, engagement in the hip-hop lyricism course would serve as an outlet for counseling that would allow urban youth to cultivate the coping skills necessary to navigate the stressful worlds in which they live.

This study aimed to answer five research questions:

Research Question 1: Do students experience a positive change in their emotional self-awareness and/or perceived stress across the academic year?

Research Question 2: Do students experience movement across stages of change for the behavior of taking action to cope with emotional stress or any negative feelings across the academic school year?

Research Question 3: When reflecting upon their experience in the course, what social and emotional themes emerged from the focus group?

Research Question 4: When analyzing students' lyrics, what social and emotional themes emerged?

Research Question 5: When analyzing students' lyrics, is there any evidence of a positive impact from the course on students' emotional stress and coping with emotions?

Method

In this study, the researcher analyzed data gathered from a pilot study of a hip-hop lyricism course. The researcher in this current study was the school counselor at a South Bronx high school during the 2016–2017 school year and facilitated the intervention. To evaluate the new hip-hop lyricism course, the school counselor collected student data via a pre- and post-course online survey, a postcourse focus group, and lyrics produced by participants. The school principal provided the researcher permission to reanalyze the previously collected data set, answering different research questions. The author obtained approval from the institutional review board at Teachers College, Columbia University, for this study.

Participants

A total of 12 course participants were randomly selected from a group of 30 volunteers. Volunteers were high school students in Grades 10–12 who indicated interest in the course on an elective course sign-up. In the initial class and on the course syllabus, the school counselor made clear that students would be able to volunteer to participate in the study while taking the class. All students agreed to participate. The remaining 18 volunteers were referred to alternative groups facilitated by counseling staff at the school. The school counselor placed a cap on course enrollment at 12 to keep the class size small and provide more individualized attention to students, adhering to recommended sizing for small group counseling with adolescents (DeLucia-Waack, 2006). The study sample ($N = 12$) was diverse, with half of the participants (50.0%, $n = 6$) identifying as Black/African American, 33% ($n = 4$) as Latino, 8.3% ($n = 1$) as Guyanese, and 8.3% ($n = 1$) as West Indian. The sample was 75% ($n = 9$) male and 25% ($n = 3$) female. Students in the sample had a mean age of 15.25 years. Of the participating students, 33.3% ($n = 4$) were in 11th grade, 58.3% ($n = 7$) were in 10th grade, and 8.3% ($n = 1$) were in ninth grade. Almost the entire sample (91.7%, $n = 11$) was born in the United States, with a single student ($n = 1$) born in the Dominican Republic. Prior to beginning the course, students and parents reviewed the course syllabus, which contained an informed consent form. All forms were signed and collected.

The Intervention: HHSWT Course

The HHSWT course was designed by the author, a school counselor at a South Bronx high school at the time, in collaboration with the school principal. Adhering to HHSWT and reality pedagogy, he designed the course to run like a counseling group, where the content was codeveloped by students. Students met every other day for 50 min for an entire school year. Most lessons in the curriculum were preconstructed to adequately engage students in discussing, writing, recording, and performing hip-hop lyrics about emotional themes. Priority was placed on the codevelopment of content with students by allowing them to coteach lessons (Emdin, 2016). The course instructor worked with students outside of class time to assist them in the design of their coteaching lessons, which focused on emotional themes of their choosing. He also set aside time and space for cogenerative dialogues (Emdin, 2016), in which the students and facilitator worked together to troubleshoot any

issues in the class. Students were supported in using their reality and life context in the classroom (Emdin, 2016) to accomplish the course goal of creating a mixtape covering emotional themes deemed relevant to their lives (Levy, Cook, & Emdin, 2018). Further, the course curriculum required that the school counselor/facilitator utilize the HHSWT practices of lyric writing as cognitive journaling, collaboration as role play, and the hip-hop cypher to support students in discussing, writing, and recording emotionally laden songs. During each group session, the instructor facilitated a conversation around a given emotional theme. After conversing, the school counselor would put a beat on and encourage students to reflect on the reactions to the conversation in their journals.

Data Collection

This pilot study involved an analysis of both quantitative (pre- and postcourse surveys) and qualitative data (student rap lyrics and focus groups), collected across an academic year. Prior to the start of the course, the school counselor distributed a precourse survey containing a total of three scales, which assessed emotional coping, emotional self-awareness, and stress. In collaboration with his doctoral advisor at Teachers College, Columbia University, the school counselor created the emotional coping and self-awareness scales. The stress measure was from an instrument created by Cohen, Camarck, and Mermelstein (1983, 1994) which is freely available for future use on their website. Students in the course took the same survey at the culmination of the course. After the final class, the school counselor engaged in two focus group interviews, each with six students, in which he asked them to reflect on their time in the course. All student lyrics were transferred into a document in the school's Google Drive account. The school provided the researcher with the focus group interviews, lyrics, and pre-/postcourse surveys for this secondary data analysis.

Surveys

This data analysis examined a total of three scales (23 items) from a larger precourse and postcourse survey. The measures were specifically selected for this study because they contained items that assessed various social and emotional outcomes. Two of the three scales, the Stages of Change for Emotional Coping Scale and the Emotional Self-Awareness Scale, were modeled after those previously used within the tradition of studies conducted by the Research Group on Disparities in Health (RGDH) and Barbara Wallace. Within the RGDH, tailoring scales specifically to the study being conducted is customary.

The Stages of Change for Emotional Coping Scale contained 3 items to measure behavior change. Items were based on the transtheoretical model and the Stages of the Change (Prochaska & DiClemente, 1986; DiClemente & Velasquez, 2002), and permitted students to rate their stage of change for the behavior of taking action to cope with emotional stress or any negative feelings. This study was the first use of the Stages of Change for Emotional Coping Scale. Reid and colleagues (2011) used the Emotional Self-Awareness Scale to measure adolescents' emotional self-awareness and reported high internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .83$). The third scale was the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-10), developed by Cohen et al. (1983, 1994). Gerber et al. (2013) used the PSS-10 to measure adolescents' perceived stress, with Cronbach's αs greater than .70 offering confidence in the scale's reliability. For the current study, the survey measures were used to assess answers to Research Questions 1 and 2, while the remaining qualitative data were used in attempt to answer Research Questions 3, 4, and 5.

Data Management and Analysis

In this secondary analysis, the researcher used the survey, focus group, and lyric data collected by the high school originally to evaluate the new hip-hop lyricism course. He had administered and collected survey responses using Survey Monkey. He downloaded completed surveys into the latest version of SPSS and calculated separate paired t tests to determine any significant difference between selected precourse and postcourse scores. The author chose not to use a multivariate analysis of variance based on the small sample size ($N = 12$), because it would have been too vulnerable to error in the results (De Winter, 2013).

This study relied on a phenomenological approach to qualitative data analysis in an attempt to further understand the sample populations' world and subjective experiences (Creswell, 2013; Guba & Lincoln, 1989). This approach to qualitative research is particularly relevant in this study given its focus on examining how promoting youth voice (i.e., hip-hop) in counseling might support youth's social and emotional development. Following the guidelines of Creswell (2013), the author transcribed all audio recordings and transferred them into two Word documents (a song lyrics transcript and a focus group transcript). He read and reread the focus group interview and student lyric transcripts to note examples that revealed students' social and emotional growth, the phenomena of study (Creswell, 2013). This process of identifying and labeling emergent examples led to the eventual discovery of themes and subthemes. The author and his doctoral advisor used a series of coding techniques, including audit trails and member checking, to ensure trustworthiness of data and credibility of recurring themes and subthemes (Creswell, 2013; Guba & Lincoln 1989; Strauss & Corbin, 2008). Each researcher coded the lyrics and transcriptions separately before meeting to critique and finalize a list of themes. Afterward, another professor at the author's university functioned as an auditor who reviewed and then discussed all transcriptions and proposed themes with the researcher prior writing about the results of this study.

Table 1. Paired Sample *t* Tests for Stages of Change for Emotional Coping, Emotional Self-Awareness, and Perceived Stress: Comparing Pre- and Postcourse Mean Scores.

				t Tests		
Scale	*N*	Mean	*SD*	*t*	*df*	*p*
Precourse SOC-3 versus postcourse SOC-3						
Precourse	12	2.944	1.081	−2.875	11	.025*
Postcourse	12	4.028	0.989			
Precourse ESA-9 versus postcourse ESA-9						
Precourse	12	3.529	0.506	−1.203	11	.254
Postcourse	12	3.787	0.711			
Precourse PSS-10 versus postcourse PSS-10						
Precourse	12	16.563	0.608	−0.528	11	.608
Postcourse	12	15.625	0.677			

Note. All *p* values above .025 are considered nonsignificant, and only those below .025 are considered statistically significant.
$^{*}p < .05$. $^{**}p < .01$. $^{***}p < .001$. Bonferroni adjustment significance (.05/2, $p = .025$).

Results

The present study examined students' perceived stress, emotional self-awareness, and growth in relation to stages of change for taking action to cope with emotional stress.

Research Questions 1 and 2

The author used quantitative data analysis to explore the first two research questions: (1) Do students experience a positive change in their emotional self-awareness and/or perceived stress across the academic year? and (2) Do students experience movement across stages of change for the behavior of taking action to cope with emotional stress or any negative feelings across the academic school year? Analyses used paired *t* tests to compare the precourse and postcourse global mean scores for the Stage of Change for Emotional Coping Scale (Table 1). Results showed improvement in coping with emotional stress or any negative feelings. The precourse stage of change for coping with emotional stress or any negative feelings global mean score (mean = 2.94, $SD = 1.08$) increased 4.03 ($SD = .99$). The difference was statistically significant ($t = -2.875$, $df = 11$, $p = .025$). Results, according to the Bonferroni adjustment significance level (.05/2 = .025), suggest significant positive movement from a preparation stage to an action stage across the academic year.

Using paired *t* tests to compare mean scores for the PSS-10 across the academic school year (i.e., precourse, postcourse), results showed decreases over time. The precourse mean of 16.563 (min 6.25, max 23.75, $SD = .608$) was higher than the postcourse mean of 15.625 ($SD = 6.774$). The difference did not achieve statistical significance ($t = -0.528$, $df = 11$, $p = .608$). For the PPS-10, the Cronbach's α was .661 precourse and .670 postcourse, both suggesting adequate internal consistency.

Using paired *t* tests to compare precourse and postcourse mean scores for the Emotional Self-Awareness Scale (ESA-9), results showed the precourse mean of 3.528 (min 2.56, max 4.22, $SD = .506$) was lower than the postcourse mean of 3.787 (min 2.67, max 4.78, $SD = .711$), while failing to achieve significance ($t = -1.203$, $df = 11$, $p = .254$). For the ESA-9, the precourse Cronbach's α was .691, suggesting adequate internal consistency and the postcourse Cronbach's α was .714, suggesting fair internal consistency

Research Questions 3, 4, and 5

The researcher used qualitative data analysis to answer the remaining three research questions: (3) when reflecting upon their experience in the course, what social and emotional themes emerged from the focus group? (4) when analyzing students' lyrics, what social and emotional themes emerged? and (5) when analyzing students' lyrics, is there any evidence of a positive impact from the course on students' emotional stress and coping with emotions? With regard to the analysis of both student lyrics and focus group interviews, three overarching categories emerged: (a) self-awareness: demonstrating increased emotional self-awareness, (b) coping skills: developing a newly learned coping skill, and (c) self-image: developing a stronger self-image. Each category included relevant subthemes explained below.

Self-awareness. Both students' comments in focus groups and students' lyrics demonstrated increased emotional self-awareness. The dominant subtheme was open with feelings. An exemplar student quote and lyric are discussed below to help to illuminate these findings, with significant phrases in italics. One participant indicated in a focus group that writing lyrics helped him think about previously unexplored emotions: "It's like, when you write and *you'd get deep in your emotions* and start to *think about things, and like be open about stuff, that you usually don't, it just makes you more self-aware.*" Quotes from actual student lyrics further supported the focus group statements, for example: "Sometimes I get in my *thoughts and it get me pissed*. Long nights when I'd reminise, but now I'm reminiscent. *Rap a bit so I can find positions*." In this lyric, the student clearly details that his long nights of feeling frustrated or "pissed" when he got in his "thoughts" or would "reminisce." However, by participating in this course, he now felt that when he was "reminiscent" he could "rap a bit" and "find positions." Other examples include quotes like "I could write a *whole mixtape on the things I feel.*" or "I wrote about *overcoming my shyness* because *that's a feeling that I have*."

Both students' comments in focus groups and students' lyrics demonstrated increased emotional self-awareness. The dominant subtheme was open with feelings.

Coping skills. Student focus group's comments and lyrics were suggestive of developing new coping skills. Analyses also brought forth three subthemes: writing through stress, cathartic, and reflective.

Writing through stress. During focus group interviews, a student stated:

> *I write about me keeping my focus in school, because school has been really stressful*. I honestly don't like high school, but *writing about my stress helps me through it*. It is the way I look at high school I have to get through it so I can pursue other things that's basically what I mostly written about keeping my focus in school.

This statement speaks to students' use of hip-hop lyric writing as a tool to deal with stress or a personal obstacle. Another example includes "I've changed in the way I think about things outside of this class and how to address certain situations. *Like if I get angry or stressed, I know how to address that*."

"I've changed in the way I think about things outside of this class and how to address certain situations. Like if I get angry or stressed, I know how to address that." [Student participant]

Cathartic. Analysis revealed this subtheme in a student lyric when a female participant rapped about using lyric writing to cathartically release anger about a conflict-ridden experience,

> I used to get mad and then want to swing,/I'm sorry I was so angry and violent./ Trying not to curse but it's on the tip of my tongue,/ and when it slips out I am ready to run./But I'm not running, no not today./Cause now you gonna listen to what I have to say.

Another student said, "Before when I keep my emotions *inside I would get tight and go off on people out of nowhere.* And now I don't because I don't keep my emotions bottled up."

Reflective. In support of the final subtheme, a student spoke to how lyric writing helped them reflect on and learn from past experiences:

> *I wrote about different situations I've been in*. For instance, like if I'm ever in a predicament *I can think back.* If you're ever in a predicament you already thought of that before. You already have this prior knowledge of what you can do.

Another student example was, "We could *always learn from our past* and like you said, embrace it, no matter what it was. That's why I love *writing about my past*."

Self-image. Developing a stronger self-image also surfaced through focus groups and student lyrics. Two subthemes emerged: (a) empowerment and voice: realizing the value of their own voice, and (b) advocacy and agency: becoming advocates for social justice issues. One student reported lyric writing aided her understanding of her own roots: "We wrote that first track about where we're from, *that like gave me a better understanding of my roots*." Another student's growth in appreciation for his own voice is exemplified by the following lyric:

> Hearing people speak used to make me feel weak,/I see *my words are equivalent in fact they're unique*./It's like the *Mona Lisa spit on this beat*/I put my heart to my crafts, so I done struggling with my past./It's just fuel that's everlasting, 3, 2, 1, I'm blasting off.

Here the student prescribed immense value (equivalent to the Mona Lisa) to an aspect of himself (his voice) that used to make him "feel weak." Another lyric example of this subtheme is "*Yeah I'm Black* so they doubt that I can make it honestly,/I promise Imma major in forensic anthropology, or criminology, *and ain't nobody stoppin' me*."

Finally, students were able to use lyric writing as a platform to advocate for social justice concerns with rhymes like "*I see the death of black men through my lens,/when they shot Eric Garner over loose cigarettes*./When they shot Trayvon for moving 2 steps ahead of Zimmerman./*I'll expose this stuff hoping we don't see this again.*" Another example of this subtheme includes, "This is the basis *justice for Mike Brown, Trayvon and Jordan Davis./Murdered by old racist* in prolonged cases and trials,/all the while dead bodies getting piled,/by *cops with a smile in a single file*."

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to determine the impact of a new hip-hop lyricism course implemented by a school counselor on students' social and emotional well-being. The study's main finding from the quantitative analysis was that between the beginning and end of a hip-hop lyricism course, students experienced significant positive movement from the preparation stage for emotional coping to an action stage for emotional coping. Horiuchi and colleagues (2010) reported that individuals who fall in the last two stages (i.e., action and maintenance) "are expected to carry out effective stress management behavior, resulting in better mental health status" (p. 292). Therefore, students being in the action stage after participating in the hip-hop lyricism course is promising, suggesting the potential effectiveness of the course in moving student participants toward taking action to cope with emotions. This finding supports the idea that HHSWT can address the need for Black and Latinx youth to develop coping strategies for variety of stressors they face (Sanchez et al., 2013; Santiago, Torres, Brewer, Fuller, & Lennon, 2016) and the ASCA (2012) social/emotional outcome of demonstrating effective coping skills for dealing with problems.

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This study did not find that participation in the academic, year-long hip-hop lyricism course was associated with any statistically significant change in perceived stress for the sample ($N = 12$), as measured by the PSS-10. However, although not statistically significant, students in the sample did experience a decrease in global mean score from the precourse to the postcourse measures of perceived stress. Similarly, although the study found no statistically significant changes in emotional self-awareness across the academic year, participating students indicated an increase in mean score for emotional self-awareness from precourse to postcourse. The results do not support the claim that HHSWT significantly altered student's emotional self-awareness or stress, but the data show a trend in increased emotional self-awareness and decreased perceived stress from precourse to postcourse. These data trends merit further study with a larger sample of students. The lack of significance in pre- and postcourse mean comparisons for both perceived stress and emotional self-awareness in the current study can potentially be attributed to a Type II error, given the small sample size (Eng, 2003). Based on mean increases, a similar evaluation of this hip-hop lyricism intervention with a larger sample might garner significant changes in both perceived stress and emotional self-awareness.

The qualitative data set finding of the self-awareness category may be contrasted with a Gresham and Gullone (2012) study that reported adolescent boys were less likely than girls to openly express emotions. In contrast to this quantitative data, the current study's qualitative data with a mostly male sample (75% male) suggested that adolescent males did make progress in developing the ability to openly express their feelings through participating in the hip-hop lyricism course. This finding supports the notion that significant quantitative changes in precourse and postcourse measurements of emotional self-awareness might be masked by this study's small sample size. Discovered growth in emotional self-awareness, in the qualitative data, is consistent with the assertion that hip-hop lyric writing and performance have the potential to create a culturally and socially acceptable space for young men of color to feel comfortable disclosing emotions (Levy & Keum, 2014). This finding also aids the claims of Emmerling and Boyatzis (2012), who posit that understanding how diverse cultures express emotions is necessary to accurately assess them. Consequently, assessing urban youth, in particular, with a quantitative measure of emotional self-awareness may be inferior to a qualitative analysis of student's expression of their emotions through their own culture knowledge and voice (i.e., hip-hop lyric writing and recording).

Although the finding of the coping skill category was based on multiple qualitative data sets (focus groups and analysis of lyrics), it may be comparable to selected quantitative data sets. Burwell and Shirk (2007) suggested that self-reflection among adolescents was positively associated with problem-solving and cognitive restructuring. Park, Ayduk, and Kross (2016) further suggested that "reflecting over negative experiences from a self-distanced perspective facilitates adaptive self-reflection by changing the way people cognitively represent negative experiences" (p. 2). In this study, under this category, relevant subthemes are reminiscent of that finding: showing ability to self-reflect on past experiences and developing awareness of personal obstacles. Huq, Stein, and Gonzalez (2016) indicated that adolescents' problematic experiences with family and peers led to interpersonal stress, which was a significant predictor of depressive symptoms. The current study found under this category the subtheme of processing conflict-ridden interpersonal experiences. Students' ability to reflect on feelings and cultivate awareness of personal obstacles is consistent for the desired ASCA (2012) student social/emotional competency of identifying and expressing feelings. Last, the qualitative evidence that students can cope with stressors aids the assertion that decreases in global mean scores for pre- and postcourse assessments of perceived stress may indicate that significant growth was also masked by the small size of the study sample.

The finding of self-image as a category suggests that students were able to develop a deeper confidence in themselves and their cultural background through participating in this course. This subtheme of realizing the value of their own voice speaks to the importance of allowing youth culture and experiences to enter the classroom (Emdin, 2016) and lyric writing as a medium to explore themselves emotionally (Travis & Deepak, 2011; Tyson, 2002). In supporting students' personal and social development, Ratts et al. (2007) called for school counselors to support students' exploration of the various systems (i.e., environmental factors) that oppress them and hinder their development. The subtheme of becoming advocates for social justice demonstrates that students were able to develop skills to process forms of oppression in the hip-hop lyric writing course with the school counselor. In discussing hip-hop and spoken word therapy, Levy (2012) stressed that "the purpose is to assist the client in moving from living in an insecure world to living with a mindset of high self-esteem and authenticity devoid of cognitive distortion and denial of real self" (p. 221). The overall category of developing a stronger self-image suggested the kind of positive impact that Levy (2012) intended.

The finding of self-image as a category suggests that students were able to develop a deeper confidence in themselves and their cultural background through participating in this course.

Limitations

Numerous limitations should be considered when reviewing the results of this study. A major limitation of this research study was the small sample size ($N = 12$), suggesting that the paired t tests conducted within the data analysis were more prone to a Type II error (Eng, 2003). Although the quantitative results showed trends in a positive direction, the analysis indicated that data did not meet typically accepted standards of

statistical significance. However, the positive trends and support from qualitative data provided a rationale for future research with larger sample sizes.

Another limitation of this study was that only global mean scores were analyzed, which may have masked individual differences among the survey items. Other study limitations included potential threats to internal validity. The surveys and focus groups relied on self-reported data and were subject to social desirability bias. Given that this study assessed the growth of students across the year, maturation is a potential threat to internal validity. The students may have naturally matured over time, leading to growth that was not relative to course participation. History was also a threat to internal validity, given the potential impact of length of the course, distance between assessments, and events outside such as police shootings, which could have contributed to students' emotional and stress responses and to their lyric writing. The lack of a control group is a further limitation to this study. Threats to internal validity may have been mitigated with a control group, but without one, attributing the observed student changes to the group intervention itself is difficult. A final limitation is that the researcher in the current study also functioned as the intervention designer, class instructor/facilitator, data collector, and analyzer. While it is not uncommon for school counselors to act in all roles, further research with a larger pool of researchers is recommended.

Implications for School Counseling Practice and Research

This pilot study has implications for school counseling professionals who wish to support their students' social/emotional development. Issues around access to quality social and emotional services have plagued urban communities (Holm-Hansen, 2006), whose inhabitants are exposed to variety of systemic stressors (Berg et al., 2009; Bohrnstedt et al., 2015; Santiago et al., 2016). Although this pilot study used a small sample, findings provide some quantitative and qualitative support that an HHSWT-based group may be effective in bolstering students' coping skills for stress, development of an authentic self-image, and emotional self-awareness. Through course participation, students achieved various social/emotional outcomes, suggesting that this course addressed the concerns of Holm-Hansen (2006) around access to quality social and emotional services, and the development of skills to cope with stress (Guo et al., 2015). School counselors may consider using HHSWT as a framework for the design of both group counseling and classroom guidance curriculum to assist students' social/emotional development.

Future research should undertake a larger evaluation of the hip-hop lyricism writing course, using a much larger sample size. Such a study could include formal training of a group of school counselors who then implement this approach across schools in multiple classrooms—using HHSWT as a tool for collaboration and creation to further address the vast social and emotional stressors young people endure. The study could use the same qualitative measures as this study but add quantitative measurements in attempt to garner statistically significant results with a larger sample size. Future research evaluating the hip-hop lyricism writing course should also include a control classroom.

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