The roots beneath the rose: Hip-Hop, counselling, and development

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ABSTRACT:This article examines the ways in which Hip-Hop functions as an asset-rich culture that can be tapped into to support youth development in counseling sessions.The theoretical tenets of a Hip-Hop and school counseling intervention are explored, concluding with a case study to illustrate its practical application.

KEY WORDS: Self-actualization, schools, adolescence

"Cold hand, sharp pencil/
I scribbled a stanza, as my hands are trembling/
Grade seven, made Heaven, out of words/
I began to build a world that only I inhabit/
I got a habit of rapping 'bout tragic ish, I think I'm just passionate/
Tryna steer the way while in the dark, Hope I ain't crashin' it"
~CHIKA

In a world ravaged by systemic inequities that disproportionately impact Black and Brown communities, there is rarely sanctioned space for those who have been harmed to articulate their lived experience. As a result, Black and Brown youth are often silenced and left to navigate social and emotional stress without avenues for voice or tools to deal with assaults to their actualization. Systemic failures to offer youth adequate mental health services are vast, with evidence suggesting that: *1)* most approaches to counseling[1] and therapy are steeped in White Eurocentric cultural worldviews unaligned with methods that are effective for marginalized youth (Singh et al., 2020); *2)* Black and Brown youth perceive mental health professionals as unrelatable, judgemental, and incapable of understanding their lived experiences (Levy, 2020); and *3)* that Black and Brown youth are significantly less likely to ascertain and complete mental health treatment (Tao et al., 2015). Instead of grappling with these inadequacies in traditional counseling approaches, much research instead is rooted in claims that Black and Brown youth have poor mental health seeking behavior (Villatoro et al., 2015), social and emotional skills (Whitted, 2011), and are down-trodden and in desperate need of help. While it is certainly true that Black and Brown youth need support in navigating stress, anxiety, depression, poverty (Powell & Davis, 2019), witnessing violence (Lacasa et al., 2018), and racism (Wang et al., 2018), it is essential to recognize how they've found ways to excel in spite of these very systemic stressors. Their existence is evidence of their incredible resilience.

The authors open this paper with a quote from acclaimed rapper CHIKA, where she describes using lyric writing as a coping mechanism when she was in the 7th grade. CHIKA nods to the themes of tragedy in her lyrics, not as a way of problematizing her experiences but to steer through "the dark." The mental health tools inherent in hip-hop and its cultural practices are exactly why helping professionals have begun advocating for their inclusion in counseling. To allow hip-hop to fully manifest in a counseling session, which is explored throughout this paper, is to acknowledge that its cultural roots are strong, and valuable for navigating systemic stressors. When left alone to cope, 7th-grade-CHIKA did what many other youths who identify with hip-hop do, she used lyric writing to create her own escape. The purpose of this paper is to examine the ways in which hip-hop functions as an asset-rich culture that can be tapped into to support youth development in counseling sessions.

Schools as centres of pathology

Considering the immense challenges of living through structural racism both within and beyond classrooms, school counselors must support youths' mental health (Lambie et al., 2019). However, it is also within schools where Black and Brown youths' existence is pathologized and policed (Emdin, 2016). Discipline data show that Black girls are three

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1   Editor's note: The American spelling of 'counseling' will be retained in the text of this article.

times, and Black boys are two times, more likely to be suspended from school than their White counterparts (Anderson & Ritter, 2017). Black and Brown youth are over-diagnosed as having oppositional defiant disorder, ADHD (Ballentine, 2019), emotional disturbance or requiring an individualized education plan (Shapiro, 2020). Educator referral biases are prevalent, highlighting that teachers call on counseling and discipline staff more often for Black and Brown youth (Gregory & Roberts, 2017), and seldom identify Black and Brown youth for gifted and talented programs (Johnson & Larwin, 2020). This reality is horrifying given counselors' role in keeping youth "on track" socially, emotionally, and academically. In this sense, counseling within schools forces assimilation under the guise of helping, igniting the historic belief that the American education system is constructed to save Black and Brown youth from the assumed detrimental aspects of their non-eurocentric cultural knowledge, history, and worldview (Emdin, 2016).

If counseling is about supporting youth in living more fully and authentically and moving them towards self-actualization (Maslow, 1968; Rogers, 1957), then counseling must become less about seeing deviations from Whiteness as problematic. Rather, it must focus on seeing expressions and articulations of authenticity as the ideal. Counseling that fails to see youth beyond pathology, eschews a necessary focus on youth assets and development, and advocates the adoption of inauthentic identities.

Schools as protective/asset–rich environments

Standing in direct opposition to school counseling that is rooted in pathologies and inauthentic development are approaches that focus on youth assets. Bryan et al., (2020) suggest that school counselors are responsible for activating all school-building stakeholders (parents, community, teachers, administration) as partners in meeting students' health needs. Bryan et al., (2020) reminds school counselors to look beyond deficit labels placed on youth and their families (such as impoverished or low SES), to highlight their propensity to be resilient despite circumstance. This stance is akin to positive youth development which intentionally sidesteps what counselors identify as risks or problem behaviors to highlight youth's strengths, talents, and resources (Scales et al., 2006). Educational environments where all stakeholders are aligned in supporting youth development create protective factors known to reduce the impact of stress and anxiety and can in-fact promote the emergence of resilience (Naglieri et al., 2013). Therefore, school counseling interventions that capitalize on students' internal assets (talents, skills, values) and external assets (family and community) are necessary (Henry & Bryan, 2021).

School counselors sit at the intersection of pedagogy and therapy, leveraging their multifaceted roles to corral stakeholders. In fact, the contextual reality of the school counselor (situated within various educational environments) makes them distinct from any other mental health professional, uniquely positioned to employ protective and developmental interventions in partnership with ancillary professionals. It is for this reason

that Levy and Lemberger-Truelove (2021) view school counselors as educator-counselors - who understand how to deploy clinical interventions through educational tasks like small-group counseling, classroom instruction, appraisal and advising, consultation, collaboration, and referrals. For example, instead of school counselors spending their time in 1-on-1 sessions with youth after innocuous emotions misidentified by teachers as problematic arise in classrooms, they might offer professional development for all teaching staff. This would aid teachers in using active listening skills that validate students' presentation of emotional content. Regardless, school counselors simultaneously pull on clinical and pedagogical skills which guide the implementation of developmental and asset-rich interventions.

Hip-Hop development

Drawing from the need for school counselors to focus on youth's assets as a medium through which development is succored, we turn to a Hip-Hop Development (HHD) framework (Hicks Harper, 2006;2008). Historically, Hip-Hop has functioned as a community practice to resist oppression through the presentation of authentic storytelling (Chang & Cook, 2021; Hill, 2009). While the Bronx was being ravaged by systemic inequities, community members formed together to create modes of artistic expression that rekindled a sense of hope and resilience. The process of creating something out of nothing or hope in the midst of despair was popularized by Tupac Shakur (1999) as the rose that grew from concrete. HHD builds on Tupac's phrase and offers a sociocultural cognitive theoretical framework with a goal of getting youth engaged in cognitive processing and healing. The HHD framework relies on the illumination and utilization of the gifts (assets) that youth bring to learning spaces.

For a rose to emerge through concrete, the roots must be strong. HHD begins with highlighting Hip-Hop roots and their primary role in the development of youth - despite any and all predetermined negative associations with the culture. HHD begins with nine root elements defined by Hicks Harper (1993) which represent core assets of Hip-Hop culture as:

1. Spirituality *(valuing and acknowledging the power and potential of the resonant yet unseen)*
2. Harmony *(promoting positive psycho-socio-cultural connectedness among natal and extended family members and communities)*
3. Movement *(rhythm, as it exists in life - physically, mentally and spiritually)*
4. Verve *(vigor, energy and enthusiasm)*
5. Affect *(emotion, passion and a need to process)*
6. Communalism *(collectivism above individualism)*
7. Expressive Individualism *(collective appreciation for individual styles of expression and their meanings)*

8.   Orality *(holding oration in high-esteem)*
9.   Social Time Perspective *(open-ended engagement, regardless of time)*

In order for educators to water roots and allow them to flourish, interventions must allow them to be Acknowledged, Known, Understood, Valued, and then Applied (AKUVA; Hicks Harper & Offiong, 2020). Hip-Hop roots align with youth assets which counselors must recognize as facilitators of positive youth development. The rose grows from concrete when its roots are allowed to set. This is the role of the school counselor, to pull from pedagogical and counseling tools that foster youth assets.

Reality pedagogy

Promising pedagogical tools like reality pedagogy (RP; Emdin, 2016) compliment the goals of counseling we articulate above because they cultivate the creation and sustaining of protective environments that support youth in self-actualizing. RP is an approach to teaching/learning with a goal of acknowledging the varying standpoints (assets) of students in a classroom and using information gleaned from students as tools for teaching. This focus on students' standpoints has brought hip-hop culture to the fore, as it represents the culture of many Black and Brown youth and serves as an approach that can be used to capture youths' realities. Hip-Hop's privileging of Black and Brown youths' voice and allowing music and other cultural expressions to communicate the emotions, makes it a powerful tool. RP sits at the intersections of critical pedagogy (CP) and culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP), believing in the need to honor the sociopolitical dimensions of teaching/learning to teach from youth culture (Kincheloe, 2004; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

RP brings the tenets of CP and CRP together to provide educators with a set of practical tools for teaching and aligns philosophically with a HHD framework. One of the chief practices of RP is cogenerative dialogue, which draws its structure from the Hip-Hop cypher - highly codified yet unstructured spaces where information is exchanged in the form of raps or dance. As in cyphers, young people in cogenerative dialogues position themselves in a circle, exchange turns at talk, and create community. The goal of the dialogue is for youth and their teacher to cogenerate a plan of action for improving their next shared classroom experience. These conversations primarily revolve around the structure of their classroom to collectively decide needed changes so all students access their developmental potential. Cogenerative dialogues honor each of the nine root elements of HHD and provide a practical way to translate a philosophy into pedagogy.

Further, co-teaching in reality pedagogy draws from the Hip-Hop practice of presenting and performing together though it extends the practice to include students teaching a class together with, or instead of, the teacher. They get the opportunity to share what their needs and concerns are and then can act upon them as the person in charge of the classroom. This practice honors students' innate knowledge and talents and trusts them

to reimagine classroom spaces that are more relevant and engaging.

Cosmopolitanism in RP necessitates youths being actively involved in the social operation of the classroom. This means youths design lessons, organize seating, decide what will be taught during certain lessons, and design the physical space of the classroom to reflect what they feel within hip-hop spaces. Cosmopolitanism emotionally connects youths to the classroom, allowing their immersion in Hip-Hop culture to transform how they exist in the classroom. When understood by school counselors, RP can be used to both support classroom counseling lessons and create opportunities for students' difficult emotions to be expressed alongside their strengths and ways of knowing/being.

Hip-Hop and spoken word therapy

If counseling is truly developmental, the frameworks that guide interventions must uphold the humanistic stance that youths are full of all the answers to their own concerns (Rogers, 1957). Therefore, 'Hip-Hop and Spoken Word Therapy' (HHSWT) is an approach to school counseling that, like RP, relies on hip-hop cultural practices (roots) to elevate the theoretical grounding and practical work of the school counselor from individual and group work to classroom interventions (Levy, 2021). That is to say, less focus is placed on the assumed brilliance of clinical advancements, and instead knowledge and pathways towards healing are placed in the community, and in the hands of hip-hop which has forever functioned as a community resource to process emotional distress, unearth resilience, and create new futures (Chang & Cook, 2021).

HHSWT pulls simultaneously from these community-defined practices to describe how school counselors can use hip-hop to form developmental interventions. For example, lyric writing historically has been a tool for cognitive and emotive journaling, found effective in group and individual counseling as a medium to foster self-awareness, emotional reflection, the restructuring of thoughts, and as a stress-coping tactic (Levy, 2019). Application in school counseling practice mirrors lyric writing as a cultural process - where school counselors provide youths with a lyric writing journal to track thoughts and feelings surrounding presenting behaviors between sessions, and then discuss, process, and refine verses to practice emotional self-awareness and alternative cognitive perspectives. Mixtape making, as a larger guide to group process where youths construct a series of emotionally themed songs around a shared group goal, is modeled after the ways that mixtapes have been used by the Hip-Hop community to collect and disseminate research about systemic inequities (Ball, 2011). As a multimodal and malleable approach to group work, mixtape making is found effective in reducing stress, depression, and anxiety (Levy & Travis, 2020).

Paired with lyric writing and mixtape making, school counselors ask youths to share within Hip-Hop cyphers - again pulling from the value of the cultural cypher as a place for unity and cohesion, with norms that allow for equal airtime, deep listening, and

the validation of vulnerabilities (Levy, Emdin, & Adjapong, 2018). This practice, rooted in hip-hop and aligned to cogenerative dialogues in RP, enhances opportunities for the HHD roots to be expressed. The creation of school recording studios as therapeutic environments draws from the Hip-Hop community's use of studios for identity development and transformation (Harkness, 2014). Students have described school studios as welcoming of peer support, personal development, authenticity, and a sense of comfort and belonging (Levy & Adjapong, 2020).

Each of these interventions validate the underlying potential of hip-hop cultural roots, as authentic and real displays of the culture can support youths in presenting their genuine selves in session and forming authentic relationships with counselors (Levy, 2020). While an acknowledgement of the power and potential of the culture to support actualization is central to the aforementioned interventions, processes for identifying assets and furthering development are missing in the literature. Thus, in the remainder of this article, we offer a case study where a school counselor utilized HHSWT and RP to deliver a large-group counseling intervention within a classroom to elucidate student assets.

A Hip-Hop based counseling course
Integrating RP and HHSWT

One of the authors on this paper is a practicing school counselor in the USA. She is experienced in leading an elective counseling course that integrates HHSWT and RP. Through recognizing a need for counseling programming rooted in student voice and reality, HHSWT was implemented as an elective class. Through this course design, the school counselor pulled from RP (Emdin, 2016) to establish student's ability to inform curricular structure and create the desired classroom energy. Through cogenerative dialogues students regularly requested group lessons around specific Hip-Hop artists or current events relevant to their lives. Further, students created their own lessons around artists like J-Cole (coteaching) that they led in front of the class. Beyond student-led course structure, HHSWT-based reflective writing activities centered intense examination of their emotional experiences. Using lyric writing as emotive/cognitive journaling and then sharing-out in an open-mic format allowed students to feel a sense of cohesion, while offering a safe space for honesty and vulnerability. Occasionally, students participated in Freestyle Fridays (a class-created cypher), where they created beats and rhymes around spontaneously chosen topics to reflect on and celebrate the week and transition into the weekend. Thus, the class was designed as a group counseling process rather than a rigid classroom environment. In sessions, students could process thoughts and feelings that ranged from the more stressful/traumatic to joyous and liberating.

Infusing Hip-Hop culture, history and social justice

In an effort to honor the history of Hip-Hop and accurately display the benefits of the culture to young people, this elective course offered students a deeper understanding of why hip-hop was created, relay its ability to address societal inequities, and describe the healing power that the forms of cultural expression represent. We posit that describing the historical roots of Hip-Hop allows young people to make connections between history and their own protest against contemporary forms of injustice such as cultural assimilation in schools (Emdin, 2021). One of the ways this is accomplished is through challenging students to create their own rhymes that speak to the intra and inter-personal experiences discussed throughout the semester. Often, writing activities were created based on situations happening in real time. For instance, with the continuous deaths of unarmed Black men and barrage of videos broadcasting police brutality, students were asked to process and share their emotions via rhyme. Ultimately, their emotions drove the direction of the class with the school counselor as facilitator. With an array of topics to cover, students analyzed the relationships they valued in their lives, the relationships they lacked and most importantly their relationship with self. As a counseling/pedagogical practice, students regularly examined lyrics from their favorite artists and examples of rhymes and poems that expressed vivid pictures of emotions. In the end, students discussed the thoughts and feelings these writings evoked.

Utilizing school recording studios
Students not only learned from other artists and peers, but they also became inspired by the power of writing and sought to perfect and expand on their work. The act of discussing their rhymes, receiving feedback, and rewriting verses is part of the HHSWT approach of cognitive restructuring through rhyme and allows for young people to experience the HHD roots. This critical reflection often occurred within the student-led recording studio and the counselor's view of it as not just a site for enacting counseling practices but a therapeutic environment. During class, students worked with the school counselor to build a school-based recording studio, as a space to retreat and process feelings, engage in deep thought, receive critique, and experience the freedom of releasing emotions. During the HHSWT elective class, students learned to use the studio equipment to record their written rhymes and poems.

    The elective counseling class offered space for students to express, record, engage in cyphers and open mics, and to build community. Hip-hop based school counseling interventions delivered in conjunction with pedagogical frameworks in classroom spaces, center hip-hop and youth voice in a way that both fosters and enhances HHD roots of harmony, verve, affect, communalism, spirituality, expressive individualism, orality and attention to a social time perspective. To illustrate how classroom counseling interventions center youth assets, we will examine a spoken word poem from a student on this course.
Analysis of student lyrics

In the spring semester of 2018, students engaged in group dialogues that culminated in writing about America as it related to their lives as Black and Brown youth. Below is a breakdown from a student verse that illuminates the assets in their writing:

> *2018 a new year for me to change,*
> *but we live in America where things will never be the same.*
> *More violence, more racism we're gonna face.*
> *They say black lives matter but in America that will never be the case.*
> *Nowadays I hear about people getting killed on the news,*
> *somehow new news hasn't become new news.*
> *I don't even stress about what happens anymore.*
> *What happens doesn't even hit me to the core anymore.*

The student opens this verse mentioning her interest in personal growth, but discusses how she feels stunted by the current state of America. Recognizing that violence and racism have always been foundations of America, the student feels disheartened by people's sudden realization that racism is still prevalent *(social time perspective)*. Modern calls for Black Lives Matter, while important, sound superficial to the student and leave her feeling desensitized/numb *(affect)*:

> *2018 a new year for room to change*
> *But what's really gonna change is the love and fame*
> *The way we look at each other and the way we amaze*
> *The way we think about others and the way we phase*
> *You can't change others you can only change yourself*
> *Be careful you may need some help*
> *Everyone always focused on the wrong things*
> *like how we dress or try to impress*
> *or the type of phone you got even though it might not be the best*
> * But they missing the real focus*
> *The things that make us stressed and oppressed.*

Here the student returns to the beginning of a new year, recognizing the possibility for change. This time, however, change is interpersonal. The student is considering how others will view her and the terminality of love and attention, with the acknowledgment of how expendable relationships can be (*harmony* and *communalism*). In light of this the student turns inward, vowing to focus on herself more than the material things she feels her peers' value (*spirituality* and *expressive individualism*). She concludes with showing concern for the bigger picture, highlighting the stress that comes from oppressive systems. In the final

stanza, she recites:

> *The things people always tryin to hide or cover up is startin to show in the light,*
> *like how you live in 2018 and racism is still hard to fight?*
> *We got a white man in power but does he really understand our fight?*
> *Does he understand that racism ain't even right?*
> *2018 a new year for room to change,*
> *so why does it all still feel the same?*
> *What are we waiting for?*
> *For people to act right?*
> *For people to realize that killing innocents ain't even right?*
> *For people to realize when it's too late to change?*
> *Well it shouldn't be too late to try,*
> *just have faith, confidence, and pride.*
> *2018 a new year for a new change.*
> *So let's make that change happen and reach your aim.*

The lyrics above comment on a pervasive sense of denial in America, spanning from willingness to name issues like racism and police brutality as still prevalent. The student's expressions of her roots in the form verve and oration are present in the series of questions she poses that ask the listener how it's possible to deny this social time perspective. She charges the listener to remember it's not too late to cultivate HHD tenets like movement, verve, affect, and suggests that we (society) collectively unite in harmony..

Cultivating awareness

The merging of RP and HHSWT offers classroom/counseling interventions that cultivate self-awareness and actualization in a way that traditional methods do not. As evidenced in the above verse, a course structure rooted in RP allowed students to engage in classroom content that could be emotionally explored via HHSWT practices. Pedagogical and counseling interventions of this kind enable youths' cultural assets and dispositions that are detailed by the HHD framework. If one of the key goals of counseling is to inspire youths to find their own answers to their own challenges, and to self-actualize, hip-hop based approaches describe a path towards meeting the needs of populations that have been historically marginalized from receiving school counseling experiences that tap into their history and culture. While this particular intervention was described within classroom spaces, it can easily be utilized within small-group counseling settings such as a school counselor's office, hospital, foster care, or alternative setting. If we look beyond pathology, and trust in youths' internal and external gifts, we can offer powerful and culturally aligned frameworks and strategies.

Finally, we recommended that pre-service school counselor preparation focusses on practices that honor the HHD tenets. For the system of education and the process of schooling to interrupt centuries of harm against those most in need of being centred, the approaches outlined in this piece must become a significant part of the training of school counselors. School counselors who position themselves between both therapy and pedagogy can lead efforts in schools to engage all educational stakeholders around asset-based Hip-Hop interventions. While substantial evidence exists supporting the use of Hip-Hop in individual and small-group counseling (Levy, 2019), more empirical studies that explore HHSWT across educational curricula unified in fostering youth development are encouraged.

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