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# The intersection of hip hop and Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) in school counseling to create and sustain homeplace

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## ABSTRACT



bell hooks described homeplace as a space for love, belonging and connection that actively resists the dominant narratives within white supremacy. This article highlights how hip hop culture and Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) led by school counselors can be used as a homeplace in schools, a space where students can speak on their experiences with issues in schools in a way they value most. This article details 2 ways hip hop and YPAR were combined to develop homeplaces. The authors describe the experiences of the students in the hip hop and YPAR process.



 Incredible work brother! This conference felt like HOME. ❤️

1 like Reply Message

We are writing this article just after the conclusion of the 2023 #HipHopEd conference, where 300 educators attended a high school in the Bronx, New York to reflect on the ways hip hop can be used within education to amplify joy and spur holistic development for Black and Brown youth. The conference, with the title and theme *Reflect, Respond, Reimagine: Celebrating 50 Years of Hip-Hop and Beyond*, sought to bridge the gap between theory and practice in hip hop education work while also centering the 50th anniversary of hip hop as a means to create new approaches for liberatory education. Levy was 1 of the organizers of this conference, and in reflection with a conference attendee, he was particularly struck by their commenting “Incredible work brother! This conference felt like HOME.” This participant reflection is important because it affirms 1 of the chief aims of hip hop education work—to create physical and emotional spaces of radical hospitality in schools where the genius and joy of Black and Brown youth are authentically experienced and celebrated (Emdin et al., 2021). In the 1970s, hip hop culture was birthed, in part, by the removal of music programs from schools during larger structural changes to the Bronx that isolated and further impoverished low-income, mostly Black and Brown, communities. The

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establishment of hip hop culture was an effort to bring together a community for catharsis, comfort, and belonging (Emdin, 2016)—key ingredients for homeplace (hooks, 1990). Thus, to be inside a school building in the Bronx with other hip hop educators, who felt “at home,” sends a profound message to educators nationally about the potential of this work to sustain homeplace. In this article, we seek to offer a framework for school counselors to utilize hip hop interventions with the express purpose of sustaining homeplace.

### ***Hip hop, school counseling, and homeplace***

We are in agreement with hooks (1990) who describes homeplaces as places of comfort, belonging, and love that actively resist white supremacy. Hip hop interventions in schools have been grounded in the reality that if

Black and Brown youth who identify with hip-hop often exist within schools in which their cultural genius is not understood or valued, then the arcs of their stories are impacted by the relationships they have with educational stakeholders that cannot see them (Emdin et al., 2021, p. 401–402).

Central to this position is the importance of counter storytelling in hip hop, that is, supporting youth in leveraging hip hop as an active mechanism of maintaining authenticity and combating identity reduction (Levy, 2020). In schools, much like the negative and stereotypical perceptions of hip hop, deficit labels are placed on Black and Brown youth framing them as intellectually deficient (Rose, 2008). For these reasons, Alim (2011) used the term ill-literacies to explain how hip hop has offered youth pathways to counter said deficit lens (being framed as illiterate) with robust lyrical skills (where “ill” means gifted). In this sense rappers who use lyrics to showcase their linguistic prowess are creating homeplace as they actively resist stereotypes placed upon them.

In school counseling literature, scholars similarly have suggested that “homeplaces exist to center the joy and excellence of youth as they resist the dominant narratives that perpetuate negative stereotypes of Black youth” (Mayes et al., 2022, p. 02). In fact, Mayes and Byrd (2022) offered that antiracist school counseling operates to both “love and protect” Black youth through the establishment of hospitable environments that resist their dehumanization. Straddling the tasks of both loving and protecting, school counselors are responsible for offering services that invite the wholeness of youth’s identities (Emdin, 2020), whilst also advocating for the amelioration of school structures that inhibit joy (Love, 2019).

While hip hop interventions have been explored as mechanisms to share stories (Kelly, 2016), cultivate literacy skills (Hill, 2009), and acquire science and math content knowledge (Adjapong & Emdin, 2015), they are also aligned with youth participatory action research (YPAR) which highlights the connection between sharing one’s narrative to engage in social justice advocacy (Lyiscott et al., 2018). Specifically, scholars have discussed a focus on “developing and sustaining the rhetorical and linguistic modes of hip-hop writing, spoken word, and digital literacy is directly connected to our commitment to disrupting hierarchies through the YPAR process” (Caraballo & Lyiscott, 2020, p. 201). Turner et al. (2013) describe how hip hop, as a social justice-based African American Language and literacy practice, offered students an avenue to research, discuss, and integrate new understandings

of social injustice into hip hop productions. In a school counseling small-group context, students were able to create and share songs in response to the January 6th white supremacist insurrection at the U.S. Capitol building (Levy & Wong, 2022). Ultimately, research supports that hip hop's cultural practices of emotional expression and social justice make it consistent with the principles of YPAR (Akom, 2009).

### ***Youth participatory action research as homeplace***

Youth participatory action research (YPAR) is a powerful approach that empowers young people to actively engage in research and social change processes (Lindquist-Grantz & Abraczinskas, 2020). YPAR is a framework in which students and educators co-create knowledge with the goal of alleviating injustices that impact youth (Freire, 2018). As a process, YPAR encourages youth to identify a problem or issue that is directly impacting them. After determining a focus, youth then collect data on the issue. Data in the sense of YPAR is all-encompassing, where data could include traditional forms (e.g. surveys, interviews) or other forms (e.g. photography, music, journaling, etc.). After collecting data, youth analyze it and develop solutions that would help alleviate the issue. The youth then share their findings with individuals who have the power to help eradicate the problem. Finally, the youth assess the outcomes of their project (Cook & Krueger-Henney, 2017). By framing YPAR as a homeplace, we create an environment that nurtures and supports the growth and development of young researchers. There are a number of key rationales for using YPAR to cultivate homeplace (Mayes et al., 2022).

First, as a tool to foster empowerment, YPAR creates a space where young people can exercise their agency and make meaningful contributions to their communities (Jaffe & Loebach, 2023). By involving youth in research, decision-making, and action, YPAR empowers them to recognize their own potential and become change agents in their own lives and communities. This empowerment cultivates a sense of belonging and ownership, making YPAR a natural homeplace for youth (Mayes et al., 2022). Second, YPAR amplifies youth voices by prioritizing the perspectives and experiences of young people, and ensuring that their voices are heard and valued. By actively involving youth in the research process, YPAR provides a platform for them to express their ideas, concerns, and aspirations. This amplification of youth voice not only enriches the research outcomes but also creates a sense of belonging and validation, establishing YPAR as a homeplace where their contributions matter (Cammarota & Fine, 2008).

Third, YPAR nurtures collaboration and relationship-building between youth, researchers, and community members. It fosters an inclusive and supportive environment where trust, respect, and shared decision-making are valued (Ayers & Torrez, 2022). Through this collaborative process, YPAR builds strong relationships and networks, providing a sense of community and belonging for young researchers. These relationships become the foundation of a homeplace where youth feel supported, connected, and empowered to create positive change. Fourth, YPAR promotes critical thinking and advocacy skill development by encouraging young people to develop media literacy, research methodologies, and data analysis techniques. It provides them with an opportunity to explore complex social issues, ask important questions, and develop solutions based on evidence (Cook et al., 2020). By engaging in YPAR, youth gain valuable research skills and knowledge, which can empower them academically, professionally, and personally. This growth and development contribute

to a sense of homeplace where young researchers can thrive and continue to make meaningful contributions.

Lastly, YPAR focuses on researching and addressing issues that are relevant and meaningful to the lives of young people. By tackling problems directly affecting their communities, YPAR allows youth to take ownership of the research process and become advocates for change (Teixeira et al., 2021). This relevance and impact create a sense of purpose and belonging, as YPAR becomes a space where youth can actively contribute to improving their own lives and the lives of others. In sum, positioning YPAR as a homeplace for young researchers offers a supportive and empowering environment where youth can explore, learn, collaborate, and create change. By fostering empowerment, amplifying youth voices, nurturing collaboration, promoting skill development, and addressing relevant issues, YPAR provides a meaningful and transformative experience for young people (Cammarota & Fine, 2008). As a homeplace, YPAR becomes a space where youth are valued, supported, and empowered to make a positive impact on their communities and beyond.

We also believe that the nature of YPAR being a tool for systems change, skill development, and relationship building school counselors are the most appropriate professionals in the building to collaborate with in YPAR. School counselors collaborate, advocate, and lead in their schools to create systems change to eradicate structures that harm students (American School Counseling Association, 2019). Their training in group facilitation and social emotional processing skills, counseling skills, and developmental knowledge (e.g., growth, identity, brain, etc.), offers them tools to support youth as they process harms experienced in school to promote healing. Using their leadership, they also can advocate for policies that sustain students' homeplaces in the school building. Examples of how school counselors lead or collaborate with teachers to conduct hip hop and YPAR in schools can be found in Edirmanasinghe et al. (2022).

### ***Hip hop and YPAR in school counseling***

Prior hip hop and school counseling research has indicated that organic, community-defined practices (i.e. mixtape making, studio creation, cyphers), which offer insight into the assets already held by Black and Brown communities (Levy, 2021), should guide the combined use of hip hop and YPAR in school counseling. A recent scoping review (Levy et al., 2023) detailed 5 YPAR and school counseling tenets that can be practically actualized through hip hop and school counseling to establish and maintain homeplace for Black and Brown youth.

First, school counselors using YPAR must honor youth as producers of evidence (Levy et al., 2022). Hip hop culture is embedded in criticality, or asking real and honest questions about inequities in the world together to work for collective advancement (Chang, 2005). Whether a courageous protest song against policing by N.W.A (Moore, 2015), Lil Baby's (2020) song and music video as advocacy for Black Lives in the wake of George Floyd's murder, or Megan Thee Stallion's public website (NBC, 2022) calling for the eradication of mental health stigma, those who identify with hip hop have a unique ability to speak truth through the creation of engaging and powerful content. Trusting in hip hop's ability to identify and report out on issues in the community, school counselors engaging in hip hop and YPAR can work with youth to explore critical questions about the systems they exist

within, to eventually create products that uncover and share first-hand evidence of systemic oppression.

Second, and relatedly, hip hop and YPAR interventions are well positioned to honor the internal and communal knowledge youth bring into schools. Levy et al. (2023) suggested that “YPAR is less about teaching youth how to research, plan projects, and disseminate knowledge and instead to trust that they (and their communities) already have tools for enacting these practices” (p. 8). Integrating hip hop strategies, Levy (2021) found that engaging youth in the creation of various songs about social justice issues called on their innate knowledge, including what streaming platform to share songs to increase the listener base or family and community members who had access to video or music production equipment to bolster their project. In effect, YPAR offers a malleable group process where participants’ internal and communal knowledge of hip hop begins to guide the work.

Third, evidence suggests that hip hop interventions can benefit youth’s academic (Kelly, 2016), career (Levy et al., 2022), and social and emotional (Travis et al., 2022) development. In 1 particular study, Emdin et al. (2016) found that youth, when tasked with writing rhymes about science content, used scientific terms to process emotional struggles. For example, 1 student rhymed about the way her respiratory system responded to a breakup. These studies suggest that hip hop, when combined with YPAR, can benefit youth’s holistic development (or addressing their social emotional, career, and academic development simultaneously).

Finally, hip hop and YPAR approaches can both amplify youth voice, as a vehicle to engage in transformative resistance (defined as actions taken for social change; Cammarota, 2017). Hip hop has always created tangible spaces for people to build community and/or express themselves. Consider, for example, the creation of the Instagram virtual event series “Verzuz.” During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, when many of us were isolated inside of our homes, a collective of famous hip hop artists came together to put on virtual showcases where they playfully pitted their music catalogs against each other (Vera, 2020). Thousands of people attended these events, sharing words of excitement in the chat, as this platform offered people a chance for social interaction at a moment when we needed it the most. Hip hop and YPAR interventions in school counseling need to function in the same fashion. If youth are looking for more opportunities to express themselves and speak out against inequitable policies in their schools, then not only should their voices be amplified via a group process where they create hip hop products, but they should host a showcase or listening party as a mechanism to disseminate their products and urge their administration to alter policy. Conclusively, administration and school staff can then utilize evidence provided by youth to change policies to alleviate the harm caused in school structures.

## **Hip hop and YPAR interventions in practice**

To further illustrate this work, we close out this article with practical descriptions of 2 hip hop and YPAR interventions in schools to sustain homeplace (Levy & Adjapong, 2020; Levy & Bell, *in press*; Levy & Lemberger-Truelove, *in press*). Both of these studies explore school counselor-led small-group processes rooted in a hip hop and YPAR model—the critical cycle of mixtape creation (CCMC; Levy et al., 2018; Levy & Travis, 2020). The CCMC is theorized as aligning with YPAR, as the creation of a hip hop product at the community

level following a process akin to that of action research. The reality that creating a hip hop product is inherently a source of emotional expression and has often resulted in some social justice advocacy, makes it a natural fit for a school counselor to facilitate YPAR groups. Two interventions are explored below, 1 detailing the creation of a school studio as a physical homeplace, the 2nd reviewing the writing and recording of a hip hop podcast aiding homeplace in the virtual space.

### **Constructing a hip hop studio to sustain homeplace**

School recording studios as counseling environments are rooted in the importance of home studios in hip hop culture. Scholars have reported that the advent of home studios offered opportunities for youth voice and agency, as they shifted creative control into the hands of the community, and away from music corporations (Harkness, 2014). In a study interviewing recording artists and music producers, Harkness (2014) indicated that recording studios were spaces where emotional labor led to both identity transformation, authentic, and relatable songs. These reports from artists are part of why Levy and Adjapong (2020) explored the creation of a school studio as an emotional support space. They found that youth who participated in studio creation reported their school studio as a “shared space for inclusivity, comfort, and belonging; a place to make their own design choices; and a practice space to garner peer support, engage in personal self-development, and support others” (p. 266).

In a follow-up study, Levy and Lemberger-Truelove (in press) explored the potential of hip hop to create hospitable environments in schools to support youth development. Practically, they followed the CCMC model, where the product was a recording studio. This meant that over a 15-week group, youth worked through researching how to create studios, creating an itemized list of studio equipment, physically setting up the studio (which involved hanging studio foam, LED lights, building a desk, and downloading audio software on a computer), and opening up the studio for recording with their peers (see Figure 1 for a detailed outline of the process).

As an evaluative measure, Levy and Lemberger-Truelove interviewed students, finding qualitative themes that suggest the studio offered youth *Access to Music and Development*, *Academic Motivation*, *Connections to School*, *Teacher and Student Relationships*, and *Peer Collaboration*. One particular quote from the school dean speaks to the importance of the physical environment as homeplace—or inviting youth’s authenticity beyond a deficit lens:

I feel bad, candidly, I’m the dean. So it’s like, “You better be good or you can’t go to the studio,” type thing. So, yeah, kind of in my back pocket. But it’s also very interesting to see them able to express themselves. I have gone in there to just get them to display themselves to me, it’s like a true raw opportunity. We’re always talking about wanting to see our students’ best selves or who they are culturally or metaphysically or whatever it is. But it happens much more authentically in a studio than it does in a classroom.

The construction of school studios as a school counseling intervention, infusing YPAR and hip hop, offers youth an opportunity for physical ownership of school spaces and authentic identity presentation. In sum, the studio is a place where student’s access comfort, belonging, and expression that actively resists the minimization of their identities—i.e. homeplace (hooks, 1990). To further illustrate the environment, below (Figure 2) is a picture of the school studio.



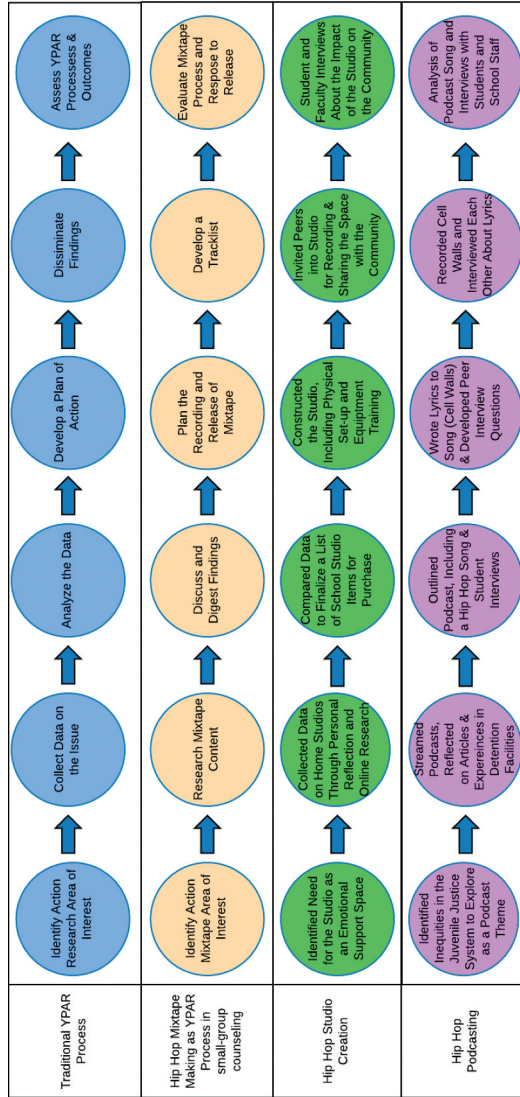


Figure 1. Infusing YPAR in hip hop studio and podcast creation group work.





**Figure 2.** A student-created school studio in New York City.

### ***Recording a Hip Hop podcast to sustain homeplace***

Also following the CCMC model, a new study (Levy & Bell, *in press*) reviews the creation of a hip hop podcast by youth incarcerated within a juvenile detention facility. Their qualitative study sought to understand how a creative small-group counseling intervention supported youth in making sense of their experiences within the juvenile justice system. In this intervention, youth underwent 7 sessions where they identified a podcast theme (inequities in the juvenile justice system), conducted research on the juvenile justice system, wrote and recorded a podcast (containing a hip hop song and series of individual interviews) called *Cell Walls* to process and share about their experience being incarcerated, and publicly disseminated their episode on a hip hop and Education podcast. An outline of this process is offered in Figure 1, and a link to the public podcast episode is here: <https://bit.ly/3q7Vlfl>.

Results from the analysis of the studio song, and interviews with students and school staff, indicated that hip hop podcasting allowed youth to work through their personal struggle being incarcerated, which included feelings of isolation, regret, and being trapped. Aligned with the intentions of both hip hop and YPAR, the youth reported their podcast sought to own their narrative, by offering advice and sharing their story for those that needed it. Staff reflections saw hip hop podcasting as an organic group process that was youth driven, asset-focused, that helped youth relate to each other. They also commented on youth's social and emotional development during the intervention, which encompassed their self-discovery, collaboration skills, and sharing of their vulnerabilities. While the podcast study in particular doesn't describe a physical environment for homeplace, it does describe how hip hop practices are a cathartic process that instills a sense of comfort, belonging, and expression amongst participants—as an active resistance to white supremacist structures (i.e. the juvenile justice system). Further, the youth's sharing of their stories via a song and podcast are sonic representations of homeplace, that invites listeners into their worlds.

### **Implications and conclusion**

We assert that the use of YPAR as a framework puts the power in youth's hands where they can see that adults value their voice in their school experience. Although hip hop

may not be valued as a culture by every student, the tenets of hip hop closely align with the use of YPAR, insofar that both YPAR and hip hop celebrate the voice of youth, allow youth to express themselves in ways that they hold valuable, and produce products that encourage dismantling injustices. We also believe that school counselors are an integral part of conducting YPAR work in schools because of their skills in counseling and their positions as leaders in the school building. Our hope is that the intervention detailed above encourages school counselors to work with youth, who identify with hip hop, to leverage their innate skill sets to engage in YPAR. But we are not suggesting hip hop is the only way to practice YPAR. In fact, it is the ultimate responsibility of school counselors to uncover the ways the cultures of students already promote expression and social justice. It is through the school counselor's deepened understanding of the cultural assets within their school community, that they can help amplify new opportunities for YPAR programming.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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## Additional resources

### 1. Cook, A. & Levy, I.P. (Eds). (in press). *Activating youth as change agents: YPAR in school counseling*.

This textbook provides school counselors with ways to infuse YPAR into their comprehensive programs. Each chapter focuses on YPAR being infused into school counseling through a developmentally appropriate lens.

### 2. Levy, I. (2021). *Hip-hop and spoken word therapy in school counseling: Developing culturally responsive approaches*. Routledge.

This book describes how hip hop and spoken word can be incorporated into a school counseling program. Each chapter details a way hip hop was infused into the structure of the school.

### 3. University of California, Berkeley (n.d.). *YPAR Hub*. <https://yparhub.berkeley.edu/home>

Developed by a group of scholars and practitioners dedicated to YPAR work, this website provides those who are interested in incorporating YPAR into their schools, a handbook to facilitate YPAR. There are lesson plans, assessments, and other tools that can help facilitators structure their work to promote change.