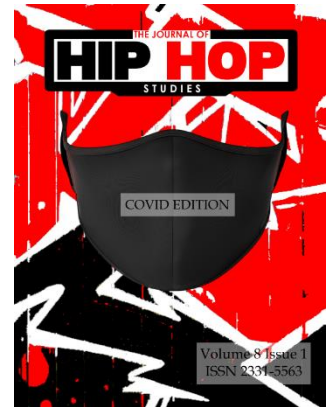# A Critical Interpretive Synthesis of Research Linking Hip Hop and Well-being in Schools

Alexander Hew Dale Crooke, Cristina Moreno-Almeida, and Rachael Comte

# A Critical Interpretive Synthesis of Research Linking Hip Hop and Well-being in Schools

**Alexander Hew Dale Crooke, Cristina Moreno-Almeida, and Rachael Comte**

Hip Hop is recognized as an agent for youth development in both educational and well-being spaces, yet literature exploring the intersection of the two areas is comparatively underdeveloped. This article presents a critical interpretive synthesis of twenty-two articles investigating school-based well-being interventions which used Hip Hop. The critical stance taken aimed to identify or expose assumptions underpinning this area of scholarship and practice. Our analysis suggested several assumptions operate in this space, including the idea rap represents a default for Hip Hop culture, and the default beneficiaries of Hip Hop-informed interventions are students of color living in underprivileged, inner-city US neighborhoods. Further, while cultural relevance is a key justification for Hip Hop interventions, few researchers engage critically with the concept in relation to students, practitioners, or themselves. We also identified distinctions between interventions that add Hip Hop, and those that center the culture. Subsequent recommendations are offered to inform future research.

It's 8:30 am on a Friday morning, half an hour before the bell rings for first period.[1] A dozen or so of the most "disengaged" students in the school are waiting excitedly outside a classroom as a small group of beat-making facilitators approach: "Yo, where've you been? You're late!" cries one of the students. "Hey, DJ Daily, let me carry that" says another, grabbing at a crate of headphones and cables, as the rest flow into the unlocked classroom in a wave of positive energy and enthusiasm. Even the two girls who a staff member warned could break into physical confrontation are laughing together, as everyone in the room helps set up the space they will share for the rest of the day.

The scene described is from a real program, one that led to a range of real, and documented, well-being and educational outcomes for those involved.[2] This scene, or something like it, will also be familiar to many Hip Hop heads around the world who have either worked in mainstream school settings, or been lucky enough to access Hip Hop culture during their formal schooling. It's likely that the benefits of these kinds of programs have been experienced by those that have participated in them. As Hip Hop scholars such as Bettina Love, Christopher Emdin, and Emery Petchauer point out, the

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[2] Alexander Crooke and Cristina Moreno-Almeida, "'It's good to know something real and all that': Exploring the Benefits of a School-based Hip Hop Program," *Australian Journal of Music Education* 51, no. 1 (2017): 13–28.

growing field of Hip Hop Based Education (HHBE) has clearly shown and proven that having Hip Hop in schools can lead to positive identity development, community empowerment, and social change.[3] Hip Hop embraces difference. It speaks truth to systems of power. It strives for its community. It's creative. and it's just plain dope.

Those with an embodied experience of Hip Hop culture probably won't need research to tell them about the benefits. They know. But as Love and others point out, whether we like it or not, research and the academy are engaging with and talking about Hip Hop.[4] And in the school setting, it's not always all good. Many within the academy have dedicated serious time and effort defending Hip Hop culture from academics who are either too focused on proving its negative consequences, or who engage a simplified and often culturally insensitive version of it.[5]

With this in mind, the purpose of this article is to explore what has been said in the research literature looking specifically at Hip Hop and well-being in schools to see whether this literature paints a picture that resonates with lived experience. It also aims to expose any assumptions around what Hip Hop is and who should participate in it. Essentially, we aim to turn a critical lens on Hip Hop and well-being in schools, in the same way that Love, Emdin, and Petchaur, and others, have applied a critical lens to Hip Hop-based education and the pedagogical space. Ultimately, we hope the following article offers some guidance for both practitioners and academics interested in this area.

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[3] Bettina L. Love, "Culturally Relevant Cyphers: Rethinking Classroom Management Through Hip-Hop–Based Education," in *Breaking the Mold of Classroom Management: What Educators Should Know and Do to Enable Student Success*, ed. Andrea Honigsfeld and Audrey Cohan (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2013), 103–110; Christopher Emdin, *For White Folks Who Teach in the Hood ... and The Rest of Y'all Too: Reality Pedagogy and Urban Education*, Boston: Beacon Press, 2016); and Emery Petchaur, "Framing and Reviewing Hip-Hop Educational Research," *Review of Educational Research* 79, no. 2 (2009): 946–978.

[4] Bettina L. Love, "What Is Hip-Hop-Based Education Doing in Nice Fields Such as Early Childhood and Elementary Education?" *Urban Education* 50, no. 1 (2015): 106–131; and Decoteau J. Irby, Harry Bernard Hall, and Marc Lamont Hill, "Schooling Teachers, Schooling Ourselves: Insights and Reflections from Teaching K-12 Teachers How to Use Hip-Hop to Educate Students," *International Journal of Multicultural Education* 15, no. 1 (2013).

[5] Edgar H. Tyson, "The Rap Music Attitude and Perception (RAP) Scale," *Journal of Human Behavior in The Social Environment* 11, nos. 3–4 (2005): 59–82, https://doi.org/10.1300/J137v11n03_04; Raphael Travis, *The Healing Power of Hip Hop* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2016); Marc Lamont Hill, and Emery Petchauer, *Schooling Hip-Hop: Expanding Hip-Hop-Based Education Across the Curriculum* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2013); Don Elligan, "Contextualizing Rap Music as a Means of Incorporating into Psychotherapy," in *Therapeutic Uses of Rap and Hip-Hop*, ed. Susan Hadley and G. Yancy (New York: Routledge, 2012), 27–38; Aida McClellan Winfrey, *HYPE: Healing Young People Thru Empowerment* (Chicago: African American Images, 2009).

## Background

Since the inception of Hip Hop culture roughly half a century ago, we have seen a steady increase in its impact on societies across the globe, most notably in popular culture.[6] Yet the influence of Hip Hop is also increasingly evident in social institutions. Two areas where this impact has been most apparent in recent decades is well-being[7] and education.[8] This impact is demonstrated, in part, by growing scholarly attention to the ability of Hip Hop-informed programs, pedagogies, and interventions to support youth development.[9] This has led to two bodies of literature that are developing in parallel: (1) Hip Hop-based education, and (2) Hip Hop-informed well-being strategies.

While each of these bodies of literature is distinct in its focus and purpose, they share several key tenets. This includes the idea that Hip Hop-informed practices offer an alternative approach to services which sit in juxtaposition to, or directly challenge, the systems of oppression embedded within the mainstream social institutions of colonial or colonized nations.[10] In education, this includes critical pedagogies which seek to help students uncover and problematize dominant narratives contained within sanctioned knowledge and learning practices.[11] In the well-being space, this includes using narratives within Hip Hop culture to help clients and professionals unpack the impact of culture, world view, and systemic marginalization on individual well-being.[12]

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[6] Jeff Chang, *Can't Stop Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation* (New York: Picador, 2007).

[7] Susan Hadley and G. Yancy, *Therapeutic Uses of Rap and Hip-Hop* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

[8] Emery Petchauer, "Framing and Reviewing Hip-Hop Educational Research," *Review of Educational Research* 79, no. 2 (2009): 946–978.

[9] See Travis; Michael Viega, "Exploring the Discourse in Hip Hop and Implications for Music Therapy Practice," *Music Therapy Perspectives* 34, no. 2 (2016): 138–146, https://doi.org/10.1093/Mtp/Miv035; and Emdin, *For White Folks*.

[10] Daudi Abe, "Hip-Hop and the Academic Canon," *Education, Citizenship and Social Justice* 4, no. 3 (2009): 263–272; T. Tomás Alvarez, "Beats, Rhymes, and Life: Rap Therapy in an Urban Setting," in *Therapeutic Uses of Rap and Hip-Hop*, ed. Susan Hadley and George Yancy (New York: Routledge, 2012), 117–128; and A. A. Akom, "Critical Hip Hop Pedagogy as a Form of Liberatory Praxis," *Equity & Excellence in Education* 42, no. 1 (2009): 52–66.

[11] H. Samy Alim, "Critical Hip-Hop Language Pedagogies: Combat, Consciousness, and the Cultural Politics of Communication," *Journal of Language, Identity & Education* 6, no. 2 (2007): 161–176, https://doi.org/10.1080/15348450701341378.

[12] Raphael Travis and Anne Deepak, "Empowerment in Context: Lessons from Hip-Hop Culture for Social Work Practice," *Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Diversity in Social Work* 20, no. 3 (2011): 203–222; Raphael Travis, Scott W. Bowman, Joshua Childs, and Renee Villanueva, "Musical Interactions: Girls Who Like and Use Rap Music for Empowerment," in *Symbolic Interactionist Takes on Music*, ed. C. J Schneider and J. A Kotarba (Bingley, UK: Emerald Group, 2016), 119–149; and Ahmad Rashad Washington, "Integrating Hip-Hop Culture and Rap Music into Social Justice Counseling with Black Males," *Journal of Counseling & Development* 96, no. 1 (2018): 97–105, https://doi.org/10.1002/Jcad.12181.

Considering the obvious overlap between these two areas, the lack of literature which directly assesses links between Hip Hop and well-being in school settings is surprising. to address this gap and help shed some light on this specific area, we undertook a narrative synthesis of twenty-two peer-reviewed research articles investigating the outcomes of school-based well-being interventions that included Hip Hop. This narrative synthesis identified many of the more practical aspects of the existing research in this area, including the key intervention approaches, constructs of well-being addressed, and the ways in which Hip Hop has been used.[13] The current article extends on this previous review by undertaking a critical interpretive synthesis to identify any assumptions that may be influencing both research and practice in this area. Critical discourses including critical pedagogy,[14] critical race theory,[15] critical applied linguistics and many more[16] have been consistently centralized across different areas of Hip Hop studies. Given this primacy of critical thinking in Hip Hop discourses, we considered this extra level of critical analysis necessary to link, and more faithfully align with, approaches in existing areas of Hip Hop studies. Furthermore, scholars argue the need to evaluate approaches when introducing Hip Hop into academic and well-being practices as there is a risk to perpetuate dominant narratives or expose students to ongoing trauma. to address these risks and support positive growth in research exploring the well-being benefits of Hip Hop in schools,[17] this critical interpretive synthesis aims to identify key assumptions, narratives, or patterns that emerged in relation to the way this research has been conducted so far. We hope that in identifying and assessing these, this article will provide a valuable resource to guide future research exploring the well-being affordances of Hip Hop in schools.

## Methodology: Critical Interpretive Syntheses

To explore themes and ideas in the existing literature, we chose a Critical Interpretive Synthesis (CIS) approach to analysis. The CIS approach is an established method of data collection used when standard literature review methods are unsuitable: "Conventional systematic review techniques have limitations when the aim of a review is to construct a critical analysis of a complex body of literature."[18] The CIS approach is

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[13] Alexander Hew Dale Crooke, Rachael Comte, and C. Moreno-Almeida, "Hip Hop as an Agent for Health and Well-being in Schools: A Narrative Synthesis of Existing Research," *Voices: A World Forum for Music Therapy* 20, no. 1 (2020), https://doi.org/10.15845/Voices.V20i1.2870.

[14] Alim.

[15] Akom.

[16] H. Samy Alim, Awad Ibrahim, and Alastair Pennycook, eds., *Global Linguistic Flows: Hip Hop Cultures, Youth Identities, and the Politics of Language* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

[17] Django Paris and H. Samy Alim, *Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies: Teaching and Learning for Justice in A Changing World* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2017).

[18] Mary Dixon-Woods, Debbie Cavers, Shona Agarwal, Ellen Annandale, Antony Arthur, Janet Harvey, Ron Hsu, Savita Katbamna, Richard Olsen, and Lucy Smith, "Conducting A Critical Interpretive

also noted useful for exploring issues around "access to healthcare by vulnerable groups."[19]

More specifically, the CIS can be understood as playing dual roles; 1) integrating information from a diverse range of studies on a certain topic, and 2) critically interrogating or interpreting results (and studies) to identify non-explicit understandings of how a field approaches or understands phenomena under investigation. This second role best distinguishes a CIS from standard systematic literature reviews or syntheses, which often focus on describing or aggregating results across studies. Beyond description and aggregation, a CIS seeks to interpret how approaches to, or presentations of research may indicate unspoken assumptions or value systems. [20] This helps uncover how researchers, or a whole field, may "conceptualize and construct the phenomenon under consideration."[21]

Ellen Annandale, Janet Harvey, Debbie Cavers, and Mary Dixon-Woods describe the CIS as a dynamic, iterative, recursive process.[22] Researchers go back and forth to the data, searching for and interrogating themes that emerge across studies which may reveal explicit or implicit understandings within an area of study. This flexible approach allows researchers to develop and revise research questions as new themes or understandings arise from the data.[23]

### Selection of Literature

Literature was identified and retrieved systematically, via searching for all peer-reviewed research articles reporting on the outcomes of school-based well-being interventions that included one or more elements of Hip Hop culture. A wide range of databases were searched (see Table 1) using the terms: "Hip Hop" (or "Hip-Hop" or

Synthesis of the Literature on Access to Healthcare by Vulnerable Groups," *BMC Medical Research Methodology* 6, no. 1, art. 35 (2006): para. 1.

[19] Dixon-Woods et al., paragraph 1.

[20] Katrina Skewes McFerran, Sandra Garrido, and Suvi Saarikallio, "A Critical Interpretive Synthesis of the Literature Linking Music and Adolescent Mental Health," *Youth & Society* 48, no. 4 (2013): 521–538, https://doi.org/10.1177/0044118X13501343.

[21] Angela Harden and James Thomas, "Mixed Methods and Systematic Reviews: Examples and Emerging Issues," in *Sage Handbook of Mixed Methods in Social & Behavioral Research*, ed. Abbas Tashakkori and Charles Teddlie (Los Angeles: Sage, 2010), 755.

[22] Ellen Annandale, Janet Harvey, Debbie Cavers, and Mary Dixon-Woods, "Gender and Access to Healthcare in the UK: A Critical Interpretive Synthesis of the Literature," *Evidence & Policy: A Journal of Research, Debate and Practice* 3, no. 4 (2007): 463–486, https://doi.org/10.1332/174426407782516538.

[23] Melissa Al Murphy and Katrina McFerran, "Exploring the Literature on Music Participation and Social Connectedness for Young People with Intellectual Disability: A Critical Interpretive Synthesis," *Journal of Intellectual Disabilities* 21, no. 4 (2017): 297–314, https://doi.org/10.1177/1744629516650128.

"HipHop" or "Rap") AND "Health" (or "Well-being" or "Well being" or "Well-being" or "Quality of life" or "Therapy" or "Counseling or "Counselling") and "School" (or "Education" or "Classroom" or "Student" or "Class").

| Index/Database | Date of Search |
|---|---|
| Discovery (University of Melbourne Library Search Engine) | 15/05/2017 |
| EBSCO Host | 15/05/2017 |
| Academic Search Complete | 15/05/2017 |
| America: History & Life | 16/05/2017 |
| CINAHL Complete | 16/05/2017 |
| Education Research Complete | 16/05/2017 |
| ERIC | 16/05/2017 |
| Family & Society Studies Worldwide | 16/05/2017 |
| SocINDEX | 16/05/2017 |
| Music Index | 16/05/2017 |
| MEDLINE | 16/05/2017 |
| Humanities International Complete | 16/05/2017 |
| Art Index Retrospective (H.W. Wilson) | 16/05/2017 |
| Communication & Mass Media Complete | 16/05/2017 |
| Ovid | 16/05/2017 |
| Proquest | 16/05/2017 |
| Web of science | 23/05/2017 |
| Joanna Briggs Inst. | 24/05/2017 |
| Cochrane Library | 24/05/2017 |
| CAIRSS for music | 24/05/2017 |
| JStor Library | 24/05/2017 |
| Science Direct | 24/05/2017 |
| Scopus | 26/05/2017 |
| Informit | 26/05/2017 |
| Taylor and Francis Online | 03/06/2017 |

Table 1 *Databases and Search Date*

Initial searches returned 3,122 articles. These was reduced to a final sample of twenty-two papers when results were limited to peer-reviewed, full text articles, and exclusion criteria were applied, which included: duplicates; studies not reporting well-

being outcomes; studies not located in schools; studies without a clear connection to Hip Hop culture. A full account of this process is reported elsewhere.[24]

## Data Analysis

Data was analyzed iteratively over sixteen months. The first iteration occurred during the literature search, where authors kept notes about key themes that emerged during the process. Upon selection of the final twenty-two papers, data was extracted to undertake the previously reported narrative synthesis.[25] During this process, Alexander Hew Dale Crooke and Cristina Moreno-Almeida kept updated notes and discussed emerging categories with Rachael Comte online. These notes were put aside while conducting the narrative synthesis yet revisited during the final write-up of results, at which stage the authors were sufficiently familiar with the data to identify the most salient themes for the CIS. A list of key themes was then used to reinterrogate the twenty-two articles and start constructing the results. During this construction, themes were updated as new topics and relationships between them emerged. Analysis was considered complete once all themes that surfaced over the sixteen months had been explored across the twenty-two articles and results had been written up.

## Position of Authors

In line with the critical approach taken, and findings and recommendations presented below, we situate this study within the context of the authors' own relationships to Hip Hop culture. This aims to maintain a position of transparency in how these relationships may have impacted chosen research questions, analysis, results, and discussion. Crooke is a white, straight, CIS-gendered male who grew up in Australia. He became an avid listener of Hip Hop music in the late 1990s and has been actively engaged with the culture as a DJ/turntablist, record collector, and beat maker for almost twenty years. After combining his passion for Hip Hop culture with an existing research career, Crooke has been working as a Hip Hop scholar and educator for approximately three years. Comte has been researching Hip Hop in non-Western contexts for the past eight years. Growing up listening to Cuban rap, she became a fan of North African rap. She has lived for over five years in Morocco, where she has actively contributed to the Hip Hop scene by organizing concerts and public debates, as well as through cultural programs such as one which brought together Colombian and Moroccan rappers. Moreno-Almeida is a white, Australian, straight, CIS-gendered female who is a practicing musician in folk and jazz scenes. She has been working with

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[24] Crooke, Comte, and Moreno-Almeida.
[25] Crooke, Comte, and Moreno-Almeida.

youth in custody for the past three years, with a strong focus on Hip Hop and Trap song-writing methods.

## Results and Discussion

Results are presented in relation to key themes or patterns which emerged during analysis. We discuss each in relation to wider literature to explore potential implications for research and practice.

### Focus on Rap

Research has overwhelmingly (68%) focused on using "rap" as the primary medium to address well-being (see Table 2). Most significantly this includes writing rap lyrics,[26] but included other active methods like performing raps,[27] analyzing lyrics,[28] and lyric analysis.[29] Passive methods included exposing students to rap songs through

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[26] See Christopher Emdin, E. Adjapong, and Ian Levy, "Hip-Hop Based Interventions as Pedagogy/Therapy in STEM: A Model from Urban Science Education," *Journal for Multicultural Education* 10, no. 3 (2016): 307–321, https://doi.org/10.1108/Jme-03-2016-0023; Tabia Henry Akintobi, Jennie C. Trotter, Donaria Evans, Tarita Johnson, Nastassia Laster, Debran Jacobs, and Tandeca King, "Applications in Bridging the Gap: A Community-Campus Partnership to Address Sexual Health Disparities Among African American Youth in the South," *Journal of Community Health* 36, no. 3 (2011): 486–494. https://doi.org/10.1007/S10900-010-9332-8; Alan Crouch, Heather Robertson, and Patricia Fagan, "Hip Hopping the Gap—Performing Arts Approaches to Sexual Health Disadvantage in Young People in Remote Settings," *Australasian Psychiatry* 19 (2011): S34–S37, https://doi.org/10.3109/10398562.2011.583046; Gretchen Ennis, Heather Clark, and Fraser Corfield, "Adventure Territory: An Action Evaluation of An Outback Australian Performance Project," *Youth Theatre Journal* 28, no. 2 (2014): 115–129, https://doi.org/10.1080/08929092.2014.932876; and Shaniece Criss, Lilian Cheung, Catherine Giles, Steven Gortmaker, Kasisomayajula Viswanath, Jo-Ann Kwass, and Kirsten Davison, "Media Competition Implementation for the Massachusetts Childhood Obesity Research Demonstration Study (MA-CORD): Adoption and Reach," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 13, no. 4 (2016): 1–11, https://doi.org/10.3390/Ijerph13040403.

[27] See Ernesta Paukste and Neil Harris, "Using Rap Music to Promote Adolescent Health: Pilot Study of Voxbox," *Health Promotion Journal of Australia* 26, no. 1 (2015): 24–29, https://doi.org/10.1071/HE14054.

[28] See Marc Lamont Hill, "Wounded Healing: Forming A Storytelling Community in Hip-Hop Lit," *Teachers College Record* 111, no. 1 (2009): 248–93; Carla Boutin-Foster, Nadine McLaughlin, Angela Gray, Anthony Ogedegbe, Ivan Hageman, Courtney Knowlton, Anna Rodriguez, and Ann Beeder, "Reducing HIV and AIDS Through Prevention (RHAP): A Theoretically Based Approach for Teaching HIV Prevention to Adolescents Through an Exploration of Popular Music," *Journal of Urban Health* 87, no. 3 (2010): 440–451, https://doi.org/10.1007/S11524-010-9435-7; and Alonzo DeCarlo and Elaine Hockman, "RAP Therapy: A Group Work Intervention Method for Urban Adolescents," *Social Work with Groups* 26, no. 3 (2004): 45–59, https://doi.org/10.1300/J009v26n03_06.

[29] See Tiphanie Gonzalez and B. Grant Hayes, "Rap Music in School Counseling Based on Don Elligan's *Rap Therapy*," *Journal of Creativity in Mental Health* 4, no. 2 (2009): 161–172, https://doi.org/10.1080/15401380902945293; and Leah Olson-McBride and Timothy F. Page, "Song to

audio recordings,[30] videos,[31] and performances.[32]

The focus on rap is perhaps not surprising given it has been the most popular and well-known element of Hip Hop culture since the early 1980s, at which stage the popularity of breaking, graffiti, and DJing had given way to the prominence of the Emcee.[33] Rap has since dominated discussions in media and academia and has become the most marketable, profitable—and arguably most demonized—of all elements.[34] It has also been centered in existing academic discourse around the therapeutic potential of Hip Hop.[35]

The popularity or pervasiveness of rap in commercial media, and consequent place in mainstream consciousness, may have impacted its prevalence in this work compared to other elements. Few authors reported personal connections with Hip Hop culture, yet the way Hip Hop is described and positioned suggests these connections varied. Some positioned Hip Hop as a culture, referencing its different elements[36] and socio-political roots,[37] suggesting at the very least an informed understanding of Hip Hop. Others positioned Hip Hop as an activity, genre or artform, primarily related to

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Self: Promoting a Therapeutic Dialogue with High-Risk Youths Through Poetry and Popular Music," *Social Work with Groups* 35, no. 2 (2012): 124–137, https://doi.org/10.1080/01609513.2011.603117.

[30] See Itsuko Yoshida, Toshio Kobayashi, Sabitri Sapkota, and Kongsap Akkhavong, "A Scale to Evaluate Music for Health Promotion in Lao PDR: Initial Development and Assessment," *Arts & Health: International Journal for Research, Policy & Practice* 5, no. 2 (2013): 120–131, https://doi.org/10.1080/17533015.2012.736395.

[31] See Steve Sussman, Vanessa C. Parker, Cheryl Lopes, David L. Crippens, Pam Elder, and Donna Scholl, "Empirical Development of Brief Smoking Prevention Videotapes Which Target African-American Adolescents," *International Journal of the Addictions* 30, no. 9 (1995): 1141–1164, https://doi.org/10.3109/10826089509055832(Sussman et al. 1995, Tucker et al. 1999, Lamb and Randazzo 2016)

[32] Olajide Williams and James M. Noble, "'Hip-Hop' Stroke—A Stroke Educational Program for Elementary School Children Living in a High-Risk Community," Stroke 39, no. 10 (2008): 2815, https://doi.org/10.1161/STROKEAHA.107.513143.(Williams and Noble 2008)

[33] Chang.

[34] For examples, see Denise Herd, "Changes in Drug Use Prevalence in Rap Music Songs, 1979–1997," *Addiction Research & Theory* 16, no. 2 (2008): 167–180; T. L. Kandakai, J. H. Price, S. K. Telljohann, and C. A. Wilson, "Mothers' Perceptions of Factors Influencing Violence in Schools," *Journal of School Health* 69, no. 5 (1999): 189–195; and Charis E. Kubrin, "Gangstas, Thugs, and Hustlas: Identity and the Code of the Street in Rap Music," *Social Problems* 52, no. 3 (2005): 360–378.

[35] Travis, *The Healing Power of Hip Hop*; and Viega.

[36] See Boutin-Foster et al.; Emdin, Adjapong, and Levy, "Hip Hop-Based Interventions"; Gonzalez and Hayes; Neil Harris, Leigh Wilks, and Donald Stewart, "Hyped-Up: Youth Dance Culture and Health," *Arts & Health: International Journal for Research, Policy & Practice* 4, no. 3 (2012): 239–248, https://doi.org/10.1080/17533015.2012.677849; Sussman et al.; and Ian Levy, Christopher Emdin, and Edmund S. Adjapong, "Hip-Hop Cypher in Group Work," *Social Work with Groups*: (2017): 1–8. https://doi.org/10.1080/01609513.2016.1275265.

[37] DeCarlo and Hockman; and Hill, "Wounded Healing."

music, suggesting a more limited or compartmentalized view of Hip Hop primarily as rap music.[38] Others offered little to no description of Hip Hop (or rap) at all,[39] and while this may be due to journal word count, it may also indicate limited familiarity. Perhaps this unfamiliarity, combined with the popularity of rap in mainstream consciousness, positions rap as the default for Hip Hop in this space; or perhaps there is an underlying assumption that Hip Hop is most relevant when it's rap.

| Author | Year | Primary Discipline | Country of intervention | Primary form of Hip Hop used |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Sussman, et al. | 1995 | Public health | USA | Rap |
| Tucker, et al. | 1999 | Public health | USA | Rap |
| DeCarlo & Hockman | 2004 | Social work | USA | Rap |
| Williams & Noble | 2008 | Public health | USA | Rap |
| Hill | 2009 | Education | USA | Rap |
| Gonzalez & Hayes | 2009 | School counselling | USA | Rap |
| Boutin-Foster, et al. | 2010 | Public health | USA | Rap |
| Crouch, Robertson & Fagan | 2011 | Public health | Australia | Rap & Dance |
| Akintobi, et al. | 2011 | Public health | USA | Rap |
| Harris, Wilks & Stewart | 2012 | Public health | Australia | Dance |
| Romero | 2012 | Public health | USA | Culture |
| Olsen-McBride & Page | 2012 | Social work | USA | Rap |
| McEwan, et al. | 2013 | Public health | Australia | Rap & Dance |
| Yoshida, et al | 2013 | Public health | Lao PDR | Rap |
| Ennis, Clark & Corfield | 2014 | Theatre | Australia | Rap |
| Paukste & Harris | 2015 | Public health | Australia | Rap |

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[38] See James M. Noble, M. G. Hedmann, and Olajide Williams, "Improving Dementia Health Literacy Using the FLOW Mnemonic: Pilot Findings from the Old School Hip-Hop Program," *Health Education & Behavior* 42, no. 1 (2015): 73–83, https://doi.org/10.1177/1090198114537063; (Noble, Hedmann, and Williams 2015, Olson-McBride and Page 2012, Romero 2012, Williams et al. 2016, Williams and Noble 2008, Yoshida et al. 2013)

[39] Lamb and Randazzo; Tucker et al.; Akintobi et al.; Criss et al.; Crouch, Robertson, and Fagan; and Alexandra McEwan, Alan Crouch, Heather Robertson, and Patricia Fagan, "The Torres Indigenous Hip Hop Project: Evaluating the Use of Performing Arts as a Medium for Sexual Health Promotion," *Health Promotion Journal of Australia* 24, no. 2 (2013): 132–136, https://doi.org/10.1071/HE12924.

| Noble, Hedmann & Williams | 2015 | Public health | USA | Culture |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Emdin, Adjapong & Levy | 2016 | Education | USA | Rap |
| Lamb & Randazzo | 2016 | Education | USA | Rap |
| Williams, et al. | 2016 | Public health | USA | Culture |
| Criss, et al. | 2016 | Public health | USA | Rap |
| Levy, Emdin & Adjapong | 2017 | Social work | USA | Culture |

Table 2 *Articles reviewed, and descriptive information*

Another explanation is that rap is the most available and easiest to consume for youth. The central role music plays in youth's lives is well documented.[40] Thus, rap may also be the element youth engage with most, offering further explanation for its prevalence in the reviewed research. The mere accessibility of recorded rap music, or the fact writing or performing rhymes is possible in most settings with minimal material investment, may be another factor. This accessibility makes it the least resource-intensive and could be seen to require little from facilitators—particularly when using receptive approaches. Similarly, there may be a relationship between the relative ease for academics to identify themes related to well-being, identity or politics in lyrics when compared to breaking or DJing. This aligns with Joseph G. Schloss's argument in *Making Beats* that the cultural, historical, and aesthetic complexity of other elements means scholars have largely focused on studying rap.[41]

There also appears a link to the primacy of oral language in health interventions. The ability to explicitly communicate messages about well-being seems a key motivation for its use in the public health interventions and psycho-education programs that rely on written or verbal language to transmit information. In therapeutic approaches, rap was often seen to offer the words (and the themes and life experiences expressed through them) necessary to connect with youth or certain communities. It was also presented as a more engaging or less confronting way to facilitate the types of conversations usually broached in talk-based therapies, either through writing or

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[40] Katrina Skewes McFerran, *Adolescents, Music and Music Therapy: Methods and Techniques for Clinicians, Educators and Students* (London: Kingsley Publishing, 2010); Katrina Skewes McFerran and Suvi Saarikallio, "Depending on Music to Feel Better: Being Conscious of Responsibility When Appropriating the Power of Music," *The Arts in Psychotherapy* 41 (2014): 89–97, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.aip.2013.11.007; and Suvi Saarkallio and Jaakko Erkkilä, "The Role of Music in Adolescents' Mood Regulation," *Psychology of Music* 35, no. 1 (2007): 88–109.

[41] Joseph G. Schloss, *Making Beats: The Art of Sample-Based Hip-Hop* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2014).

discussing lyrics. These rationales align with music therapy practice and theory,[42] and can be seen to underpin the different iterations[43] of rap therapy and its particular relevance to youth of color.[44]

Use of rap as literary text and its ready translation to school settings also seemed important. The ability to integrate rap into existing school programs or activities appeared fundamental to at least two articles investigating interventions embedded within the curriculum.[45] Here, Marc Lamont Hill as well as Christopher Emdin, Edmund S. Adjapong, and Ian Levy reported that the writing and analyzing of raps to achieve educational goals afforded important opportunities for self-reflection, connection, and subsequent psychosocial benefits. This aligns with how rap lyrics have been used as texts for critical pedagogy,[46] and the sizable amount of literature exploring the diverse roles of rap in curriculum and pedagogy.[47] Rationales for using rap also related to particular stylistic qualities, including the speed and rhythm of the music, the idea that it is "readily learned," and value of call and response for information retention.[48]

While these factors suggest rap is a logical choice in this space, it does invite the question of whether other elements of Hip Hop are suitable for addressing well-being in schools. The only other element reported[49] as the focus of a program was "dance,"[50] however dance often shared this focus with rap.[51] Some reported more holistic approaches, centering three or more elements in a way that made explicit reference to

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[42] Kenneth E. Bruscia, *Defining Music Therapy* (3rd ed., Gilsum, NH: Barcelona Publishers, 2014); and McFerran.

[43] Don Elligan, *Rap Therapy: A Practical Guide for Communicating with Youth and Young Adults Through Rap Music* (New York: Kensington Books, 2004); Caroline Kobin and Edgar Tyson, "Thematic Analysis of Hip-Hop Music: Can Hip-Hop in Therapy Facilitate Empathic Connections When Working with Clients in Urban Settings?" *The Arts in Psychotherapy* 33, no. 4 (2006): 343–356, https://doi.org/10.1016/J.Aip.2006.05.001; and Edgar H. Tyson, "Hip Hop Therapy: An Exploratory Study of a Rap Music Intervention with At-Risk and Delinquent Youth," *Journal of Poetry Therapy* 15, no. 3 (2002): 131–144.

[44] Alvarez.

[45] Emdin, Adjapong, and Levy, "Hip-Hop Based Interventions"; and Hill, "Wounded Healing."

[46] David Stovall, "We Can Relate: Hip-Hop Culture, Critical Pedagogy, and the Secondary Classroom," *Urban Education* 41, no. 6 (2006): 585–602, https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085906292513.

[47] Petchauer, "Framing and Reviewing Hip-Hop Educational Research."

[48] Noble, Hedmann, and Williams.

[49] Harris, Wilks, and Stewart.

[50] It is acknowledged the dance element of Hip Hop culture is more often referred to as B-Girling/B-Boying or breaking. However, the term ''dance'' is used here to reflect language used in the reviewed articles.

[51] McEwan et al.

their shared position in Hip Hop culture.[52] We understood these studies as using "Hip Hop culture" as a medium to impact well-being, rather than distinct elements. Outcomes from these dance or culture studies do indicate their value for well-being, with culture-based approaches emerging as particularly valuable. That significantly fewer studies reported on non-rap focused interventions indicates an area with significant scope for future study. This aligns with wider calls to explore the well-being benefits of interventions which employ multiple Hip Hop elements.[53]

### Focus on US Students of Color in Underprivileged Inner-city Neighborhoods

Just as rap emerged as the default for Hip Hop, the relationship between Hip Hop and well-being emerged most relevant in the US, with students of color living in disadvantaged inner-city communities. This was evidenced by the fact sixteen of twenty-two studies were located in the US and involved primarily African American participants.[54] Students of Hispanic (including Mexican/Mexican-American; Romero 2012) Asian, Native American,[55] Pacific Islander, and "mixed heritage" backgrounds[56] were also prominent. Most of these studies were also located in inner-city neighborhoods.[57]

This focus is again logical given Hip Hop originated within inner-city neighborhoods of US cities and speaks directly to the realities of African American and Afro-Latinx communities, and we do not dispute this relevance remains.[58] Nevertheless, it begs the question of whether Hip Hop is seen as only relevant for people of color and disadvantaged communities and whether this perceived relevance is shaped by an underlying assumption that goes beyond cultural and historical links. This question becomes more relevant considering that even Australian studies have focused on

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[52] Williams et al.; Romero; Levy, Emdin, and Adajapong, "Hip-Hop Cypher in Group Work"; and Noble, Hedmann, and Williams.

[53] Travis and Viega.

[54] Gonzalez and Hayes; Hill, "Wounded Healing"; Lamb and Randazzo; and Noble, Hedmann, and Williams.

[55] Akintobi et al.

[56] Sussman et al.

[57] Crooke, Comte, and Moreno-Almeida.

[58] Chang; Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1994); Tricia Rose, *The Hip-Hop Wars: What We Talk about When We Talk about Hip-Hop and Why it Matters* (New York: Civitas Books, 2008); and Venice Thandi Sulé, "White Privilege? The Intersection of Hip-Hop and Whiteness as a Catalyst for Cross-Racial Interaction among White Males," *Equity & Excellence in Education* 48, no. 2 (2015): 212–226.

Indigenous[59] and diverse students from low socio-economic backgrounds.[60] Again, this suggests an assumed best-fit between these communities and Hip Hop.

This focus on marginalized students of color is also reported in the field of Hip Hop pedagogy. In a Facebook post, Dr. Jarritt Sheel offered a critical take on what might be seen as a narrow view of the relevance of Hip Hop in this space:

> The general narrative that hip-hop pedagogies […] can only benefit children of color, and those on the margin is simply reductive and simplistic. Hip-hop, like all music, has portions that are universal and others that are very specific in nature (cultural references). HOWEVER, because the times we live in (contemporary times) and the nature of how interconnected our society is, hip-hop is world-wide—EVERYWHERE. So, it benefits ALL to explore, examine and interrogate it.[61]

Through ensuing discussion, Sheel and other scholars such as Adam J. Kruse suggest that while the voices of marginalized communities should remain foregrounded in this exploration, many aspects of Hip Hop have value for the world at large (including the foregrounding of marginalized voices).[62] Martin Urbach has expanded this further, arguing that limiting relevance to disadvantaged or non-white communities can perpetuate narratives of oppression:

> On top of being simply reductive and simplistic, that view upholds white supremacy culture. Got a misbehaved class? Teach them hiphop. Teach in a "title 1" school teach them hiphop. Teach in an Urban school? Teach them hiphop. Kids are disengaged? Teach them hiphop. Kids destroy instruments? Teach them hiphop. Don't have any budget? Teach them hiphop. Are you afraid your classes look like a shitshow because X and your principal is gonna show up? Teach them hiphop.[63]

This quote appears to speak to an underlying assumption that white or mainstream communities don't need Hip Hop. Rather it is something brought in only as a last resort or a pacifier for non-dominant peoples. This has clear implications for the othering of such peoples and introduces the idea that Hip Hop interventions are code for strategies to work with students beyond the reach of interventions for people of a dominant culture. An example of this in the reviewed articles comes from Steve Sussman et al., who, after comparing the use of soap opera-styled and rap-themed videotapes to deliver health messages, offer this key recommendation:

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[59] McEwan et al.

[60] Paukste and Harris.

[61] Jarrit Sheel, Facebook, Sept. 3, 2018

[62] Sheel; and Adam J. Kruse, "'Therapy Was Writing Rhymes': Hip-Hop as Resilient Space for A Queer Rapper of Color," *Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education* nos. 207-08 (2016): 101–122. https://doi.org/10.5406/Bulcouresmusedu.207-208.0101.

[63] Martin Urbach, Facebook, Sept. 3, 2018.

> The soap videotape is the preferred one to show to general audiences, although the rap videotape should be used with higher risk hip-hop oriented youth. This recommendation is made because the results […] indicate that the soap videotape is better liked by students, and […] that such a less extreme approach would have a longer shelf-life and be more well-received by adult gatekeepers. On the other hand, the rap videotape is considered more believable and more accurate in its depiction of African-American culture. Also, hip-hop oriented audiences are likely to better receive the rap videotape because of its explicit appeal to the hip-hop culture.[64]

Venice Thandi Sulé explains such positioning as playing into a larger process where "despite its appeal in a culture where whiteness is the norm […] hip-hop remains stigmatized because of its association with the black experience, which is often framed as dysfunctional and criminal in public discourse."[65] Sulé further argues, given a substantial percentage of the Hip Hop fanbase are white and Hip Hop remains centered on Black, urban identity, engaging those from the dominant white culture offers a powerful opportunity to address issues around white privilege, cross-racial interactions, and social equity. While such issues may not be a priority for all well-being interventions, the ability for Hip Hop programs to provide a space for such culture-centered discussions indicates important potential for social-focused interventions.

From an international perspective, "people of colour" may not resonate or be a significant identifier for some communities or individuals facing marginalization. The complexities of Australia's colonial history mean skin color is a problematic identifier for some Indigenous Peoples.[66] This introduces further nuance to underlying assumptions that Hip Hop is most relevant to students of colour.

It's unlikely existing research has intentionally sought to establish Hip Hop programs as deficit-based interventions. Neither have they focused solely on disadvantaged students of color living in inner-city neighborhoods. Several studies include white students[67] or were located in rural or suburban areas.[68] Some studies also recommended the applicability of Hip Hop-based programs for other socioeconomic groups. Nevertheless, there appears to be a sustained focus. For example, in 2008, Olajide Williams and James N. Noble stated:

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[64] Sussman, Parker, Lopes, Crippens, Elder, and Scholl, 1155.

[65] Sulé, 213.

[66] Suzi Hutchings, "Indigenous Anthropologists Caught in the Middle: The Fragmentation of Indigenous Knowledge in Native Title Anthropology, Law and Policy in Urban and Rural Australia," in *Transcontinental Dialogues: Activist Research and Alliances from and with Indigenous Peoples of Canada, Mexico and Australia*, edited by R. Aída Hernández Castillo, Suzi Hutchings, and Brian Noble (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2019), 193–219.

[67] Criss et al.

[68] Paukste and Harris.

> The generalizability of this version of HHS [Hip Hop Stroke] to other ethnic groups or to suburban and rural areas is uncertain. The majority of central Harlem's elementary school students are African-American or Caribbean-Hispanic. Given the adaptability of HHS to popular culture, it may be effective among diverse groups.[69]

Yet, seven years later the same authors reported ongoing concentration in this area:

> Given the ubiquitous nature of hip-hop in popular culture […] it may be effective among diverse sociodemographic groups beyond those studied here. Our program has not yet been tested outside of Manhattan, New York City, although our group is currently exploring generalizability of our other hip-hop-themed programs to other communities, given hip-hop's broad appeal.[70]

Despite recognition of a gap, these quotes suggest sustained focus in this area. Yet, the value of widening the purview of research seems important. As noted, Hip Hop has significant appeal across a broad cross-section of society, yet its potential in supporting student well-being throughout this cross-section remains underexplored. Again, an international lens amplifies this issue; despite a handful of studies in Australia and one in Lao PDR,[71] research is overwhelmingly concentrated in the US. This jars with the extensive adoption of Hip Hop culture across the globe[72] and signifies a major gap in current research.[73]

### The Idea of Cultural Relevance

Hip Hop's function of making well-being interventions relevant to the cultural experience of the "default" communities mentioned above was the most salient theme to emerge across studies. While terminology used to describe this notion ranged from "cultural relevance" to "cultural targeting", "cultural familiarity", "culturally appropriate", and "culturally sensitive", several assumptions appeared to underpin these culturally bound justifications for using Hip Hop. While acknowledging the important role Hip Hop plays in grounding programs and activities within youth culture—particularly those traditionally marginalized [74]—we suggest this concept

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[69] Williams and Noble.

[70] Noble, Hedmann, and Williams, "Improving Dementia Health Literacy," 80.

[71] Itsuko Yoshida, Toshio Kobayashi, Sabitri Sapkota, and Kongsap Akkhavong, "A Scale to Evaluate Music for Health Promotion in Lao PDR: Initial Development and Assessment," *Arts & Health: International Journal for Research, Policy & Practice* 5, no. 2 (2013): 120–131. https://doi.org/10.1080/17533015.2012.736395.

[72] Tony Mitchell, ed., *Global Noise: Rap and Hip Hop Outside the USA* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2002); and Marcyliena Morgan, "'The world is yours': The Globalization of Hip-Hop Language," *Social Identities* 22, no. 2 (2016): 133–149.

[73] This research gap may well be amplified in this review given only papers in English were included in the analysis.

[74] Alvarez; and Travis.

requires critical assessment in several areas. The first involves student perceptions of relevance, and their experience of engagement. Many studies, particularly those using quantitative methods, appear to assume students perceived programs as authentic representations of Hip Hop. James B. Tucker compared the suitability of a rap video against a generic or "commercial" video in raising student awareness about violence and trauma. Students reported the commercial video as more effective. This may be explained by the fact the rap video was created by violence prevention staff (whose connection with Hip Hop is unclear), and therefore perhaps insufficiently representative of students' experience of Hip Hop. This contrasts with several studies that did engage Hip Hop community members—who were actively practicing a given element (i.e., Emceeing or Breaking)—to design or deliver programs. Here, engaging members of the Hip Hop community was reported critical for achieving observed outcomes. [75] Thus, maintaining authentic connection to Hip Hop culture seems paramount when implementing interventions under the rationale of cultural relevance.

Further, fostering or maintaining genuine connection to the Hip Hop community also presents social justice issues; when cultural relevance is cited as central to a program, youth have the right to authentic cultural experiences within those programs. Additionally, Hip Hop has been historically marginalized in mainstream institutions[76] and appropriated by dominant cultural groups in Western countries, [77] meaning practitioners of Hip Hop are often excluded from practicing in such spaces, while facilitators with little or no connection to the culture are positioned as representatives in their place. This misses an important opportunity to engage and acknowledge the value of marginalized Hip Hop practitioners, placing an onus on researchers or practitioners wanting to utilize Hip Hop to be respectful and responsible in this space.

Researchers and practitioners should also evaluate how they engage with the idea of cultural relevance. Is it just a convenient way to "reach youth," or is there genuine and critical engagement with how Hip Hop relates to the reality of the students? Ian Levy, Christopher Emdin, and Edmund S. Adjapong write explicitly about how their participants (students of color in inner-city neighborhoods) were negatively affected by a system (government, education, and health systems) that demonize them, which in turn impacts their willingness to engage in well-being services seen as part of

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[75] For examples, see Williams and Noble; and Paukste and Harris.

[76] Robert Murray Thomas, *What Schools Ban and Why* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2008); and Ethan Hein, *Teaching Whiteness in Music Class*, the Ethan Hein Blog, May 18, 2018, http://www.ethanhein.com/wp/2018/teaching-whiteness-in-music-class/.

[77] Kruse, "'Therapy was writing rhymes,'"; and Jason Rodruiguez, "Color-Blind Ideology and The Cultural Appropriation of Hip-Hop," *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 35, no. 6 (2006): 645–668, https://doi.org/10.1177/0891241606286997.

that same system.[78] They then present Hip Hop as something that both relates directly to their particular lived experience—beyond fashion and slang, but as a culture that explicitly seeks to voice resistance to the same system that marginalizes them—and also offers an alternative to existing services or programs. Here, clear links are drawn between how Hip Hop is positioned in relation to the socio-cultural realities of students, and how this positioning can generate meaningful participation and specific well-being outcomes.

This same depth is not evident in all studies. Many appear to rely on perceived relevance to students, and assumptions this relevance is sufficient to engage youth without having to address any potentially contributing systemic issues. A different issue is where such systemic issues are acknowledged, yet the relevance of Hip Hop to the context is not sufficiently explored. Gretchen Ennis, Heather Clark, and Fraser Corfield write:

> The impacts of colonization on Indigenous Australian communities have been devastating […] Understanding the historical and lived realities of Australian colonization and its manifestations in particular communities is critical for community arts programs to avoid reproducing already existing social inequalities.[79]

Yet, there is no discussion of how Hip Hop relates either to this community, or issues of colonization more broadly. This suggests interventions would benefit from engaging with the concept of cultural relevance beyond what is appealing to students, including how it relates to their socio-cultural situation and constructs of well-being addressed.

Considering whether Hip Hop does constitute relevance to the socio-cultural reality of given student groups becomes critical if researchers follow recommendations to explore benefits in wider populations. Such recommendations are inevitably based on claims for the "wide appeal" of Hip Hop to youth. Yet, there is little critical engagement with what constitutes this appeal beyond relevance to disadvantaged communities or global youth culture. This begs the question of how youth culture is conceived at a global level—is it something that is homogenous around the world? Itsuko Yoshida et al. found students living in a major Laotian city considered Hip Hop as less effective or relevant for promoting well-being messages than traditional string or folk music.[80] This suggests, whether or not Hip Hop had "appeal" to these youth, it was less relevant for supporting well-being in their cultural context.

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[78] Levy, Emdin, and Adjapong, "Hip-Hop Cypher in Group Work."
[79] Ennis, Clark, and Corfield, 117.
[80] Yoshida, Kobayashi, Sapkota, and Akkhavong.

This is not to say Hip Hop doesn't speak profoundly to the lives of diverse youth globally, there is abundant evidence it does. Yet, it does suggest the need to carefully consider how different student populations experience their connection with Hip Hop and the subsequent impact on well-being interventions. Specifically, it indicates the need to explore intersections between Hip Hop (local and imported), cultural relevance, and well-being in other countries, to ensure researchers and practitioners are better placed to deliver and investigate Hip Hop programs.

### Adding Hip Hop versus Working Through It

A difference emerged between studies that centered Hip Hop and those where it was an add-on. Studies positioning Hip Hop as an add-on used Hip Hop-related activities or aesthetics as a way to foster buy-in from participants to an intervention not grounded within the culture or practice of Hip Hop. Here Hip Hop often "serves as a 'hook,' or a means of encouraging attendance and piquing interest" in an intervention for "disengaged" or hard to reach populations.[81] Tabia Henry Akintobi et al. have explained how Hip Hop was used to increase participation and retention in an existing evidence-based intervention model: "Additional programming implemented to increase the effectiveness of the program included art classes that were geared toward and appealed to African-American youth culture such as hip-hop and rap."[82] Here we see Hip Hop engaged almost as an afterthought to promote appeal or engagement in, or compensate for the (perceivably) unengaging nature of, the 'real' intervention.

While other studies took a more considered approach, often Hip Hop still emerged as a marketing tool rather than an approach or orientation. James B. Tucker et al. (1999) and Sussman et al. (1995) list cultural cues (slang, clothing, graffitied walls, rap music, and breakdancing) embedded within health-promotion material to increase its appeal.[83] Olajide Williams and James M. Noble describe engaging long-time rapper Doug-E-Fresh to deliver a rap about stroke.[84] While this may suggest engagement with Hip Hop culture, it appears more an effort to use the cultural capital offered by Doug-E-Fresh and Hip Hop culture to deliver information from mainstream health discourse. This approach may be aptly framed via the notion of "cultural targeting" used by Olajide Williams et al., which implies that certain cultural cues can be used successfully

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[81] Olson-McBride and Page, 125.
[82] Akintobi et al., 487.
[83] James B. Tucker, J. E. Barone, J. Stewart, R. J. Hogan, J. A. Sarnelle, and M. M. Blackwood, "Violence Prevention: Reaching Adolescents with the Message," *Pediatric Emergency Care* 15, no. 6 (1999): 436–439, https://doi.org/10.1097/00006565-199912000-00019; and Sussman et al.
[84] Williams and Noble.

to access, engage, or communicate to certain communities.[85] For several authors this revolved chiefly around embedding, reframing, or packaging information with/in cultural signifiers so it could be consumed, accessed, or understood in relation to particular students' world realities. We do not deny this approach may prove useful in some contexts, yet we do suggest it limits the potential of Hip Hop in this space to a "sweetener" rather than an agent of well-being.

Conversely, rather than simply adding Hip Hop artifacts as cultural signifiers, interventions that worked through Hip Hop appeared to use the culture itself to achieve certain well-being goals. These interventions used messages, narratives, processes or practices that are endemic to Hip Hop to support or scaffold well-being: rather than repackaging messages from outside, health promoting messages/ practices are located within the culture. Examples included studies where a particular element of Hip Hop was seen as a primary agent for well-being, or where Hip Hop culture provided a lens or orientation for addressing a well-being issue. This includes Levy et al.'s study mentioned above,[86] and Hill, who not only used the text of rap songs as culturally relevant tools to facilitate dialogue, but also drew upon the ideological orientations within Hip Hop culture to support student well-being.[87] This involved foregrounding discourse within Hip Hop (and associated texts) around issues of privilege, class, race, gender, sexuality, and identity, and exploring how these related to students' own narratives. Andrea J. Romero went beyond using breaking as a physical activity, including several other aspects of Hip Hop culture to scaffold students' understanding of physical health through a cultural lens.[88] This included "interactive discussions on the basis of Critical Hip Hop Pedagogy [which] encouraged youth to critically think about social injustices (e.g., discrimination, neighborhood resources) through rap lyrics and graffiti images," and how these issues impacted physical health in their localized setting.[89] In both cases, inclusion went beyond adding a Hip Hop activity or aesthetic to increase an intervention's appeal or relevance. Rather, Hip Hop culture, its particular elements, and orientations to being in the world, were seen as the primary well-being resources.

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[85] Olajide Williams, A. Desorbo, V. Sawyer, D. Apakama, M. Shaffer, W. Gerin, and J. Noble, "Hip Hop HEALS: Pilot Study of a Culturally Targeted Calorie Label Intervention to Improve Food Purchases of Children," *Health Education & Behavior* 43, no. 1 (2016): 68–75, https://doi.org/10.1177/1090198115596733.

[86] Levy, Emdin, and Adjapong, "Hip-Hop Cypher in Group Work."

[87] Levy, Emdin, and Adjapong, "Hip-Hop Cypher in Group Work"; and Hill, "Wounded Healing."

[88] Romero.

[89] Romero, 210.

This approach aligns with Michael Viega's discussion of incorporating Hip Hop in music therapy:

> Hip Hop is not something we simply do, but a way of being in the world in relation to one's self and with each other; it is something that is produced with the world of relationships; it is an ingrained understanding of what it is to be other, marginalized, oppressed, and victimized, not only culturally, socially, and politically, but psychologically as well.[90]

Again, we see reference to Hip Hop as representing an orientation to or understanding of being in the world. It seems invalidating or not fully acknowledging this orientation when engaging Hip Hop for well-being may do a disservice. This is because Hip Hop can speak to the contextual (personal, social and systemic) factors that underpin many health and well-being issues, helping address the impact of these on well-being goals.

Kruse offers an interpretation of the difference between "using" and working "through" Hip Hop in the music education classroom. He articulates this in terms of going "beyond teaching hip-hop skills and songs to actually being hip-hop," where the latter represents using Hip Hop culture as an orientation to classroom work, rather than simply adding Hip Hop songs or activities to existing curriculum or pedagogical approaches.[91] He explains how this requires a shift in perspective: from relying on the cultural attaché of Hip Hop artefacts, to taking on principals of Hip Hop culture which themselves carry transformative potential. Expanding on this idea through social media, Kruse posits that such engagement requires acknowledging the potential discrepancies that Hip Hop culture may present in a traditional school setting.[92] This includes different understandings of power, privilege, values, and relationships between students and adults. He contends faithful engagement thus requires preparation of a space to account for the worldviews embedded or represented within the culture and also to avoid superficial use of Hip Hop in ways that may speak or lead to cultural appropriation. He further argues that not doing this can be harmful as it has the potential to alienate students and reinforce negative cultural stereotypes. This consideration is particularly important when cultural relevance is a key goal: if the presentation of Hip Hop jars with students' experience of it, it may disengage students and thus undermine the goals of presenting culturally relevant interventions.

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[90] Viega, 140.

[91] Kruse, "Being Hip Hop," 53.

[92] Adam J. Kruse, "'Hip-Hop wasn't Something a Teacher Ever Gave Me': Exploring Hip-Hop Musical Learning," *Music Education Research* 20, no. 3 (2018): 317–329, https://doi.org/10.1080/14613808.2018.1445210.

## Need to Consider Potential Contraindications

Few articles considered any potential contraindications of using Hip Hop in this space, suggesting a presupposition that well-being interventions that engage Hip Hop will always be a positive experience. Yet Hill (2009) has identified several potential contraindications for using Hip Hop for well-being in classrooms.[93] Like Kruse, Hill argues the need to consider and constantly reassess how bringing Hip Hop into education spaces impacts power relations, as well as student and facilitator experiences and expectations of being in a traditional schooling space. They also argue the need to reflect critically on the impact of connecting students to culturally relevant ideas, concepts, or narratives:

> We must resist the urge to romanticize the relocation of previously marginalized cultural artifacts, epistemologies, and rituals into formal academic spaces. Although such processes can yield extraordinary benefit, we must also take into account the problematic aspects of "culture" and the underside of "relevance." in particular, we must keep track of the ways in which many of our connections to culturally relevant texts are under written by stories of personal pain, forces of structural inequality, and sources of social misery. Although these realities should not necessarily disqualify such texts from entering the classroom, they demand that we move beyond merely hortatory approaches and adopt more critical postures.[94]

Hill's argument suggests the need to consider the impact of cultural relevance beyond an engagement strategy, and how—despite facilitators' intentions—it may surface associations which are not always positive. Hill also stresses consideration for how this content—and commitment to opening up democratic spaces to process issues—may impact facilitators. Furthermore, creating such spaces can mean facilitators open themselves, and students, to exposing and potentially destabilizing their sense of self.

Similarly, Viega argues music therapists should undertake preparation before working with or through Hip Hop. This includes reflection on the ethical implications of introducing aspects of Hip Hop that may be emotionally laden and being prepared to cope with any issues that such introduction brings to the fore for clients and facilitators. Viega advocates for appropriate facilitator training in this area, ongoing support, and critical self-awareness. From a social work perspective, Raphael Travis argues— particularly when employing Hip Hop to address trauma—facilitators should actively work to minimize chances that students are re-exposed to traumatic experiences or conditions.[95] This suggests an imperative for facilitators to dedicate time and effort to

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[93] Hill, "Wounded Healing."
[94] Hill, "Wounded Healing," 290-91.
[95] Travis, *The Healing Power of Hip Hop*.

preparing themselves for this work to avoid reenforcing the very issues they aim to ameliorate.

## Positionality of Facilitators

It appears having people familiar with (or practitioners of) Hip Hop culture involved in the conceptualization or delivery of programs was valuable for cultural relevance and engagement. Olajide Williams et al. argued the importance of having "role models (hip-hop artists) advocating healthy eating behaviors [for] reframing dietary norms."[96] Ernesta Paukste and Harris (2015) report having program facilitators that were recognized rap artists, producers, and promoters was critical for student engagement. Students described this as "Learning from the real deal," and facilitators noted the "positive body language and visible excitement of participants when working with the rap artists."[97] Stakeholders elaborated that beyond the "Wow factor" artists provided "Great role models" and "students were less involved when rap artists were not present."[98] For Romero (2012), having program content "created in collaboration with key stakeholders [which included] local break dancers" was significant for grounding their obesity intervention within Hip Hop culture.[99] Further, by integrating social role models who shared important sociocultural contexts with the students, students could both relate to facilitators and discuss physical health in the context of their own cultural milieu.

These examples indicate the importance of facilitators' positionality in relation to Hip Hop culture; seemingly, having facilitators familiar with, or positioned within, the culture reduces potential schisms between their own cultural realities and student experience. Yet, being an insider to Hip Hop culture did not always present the most important factor. Several authors stressed the importance of acknowledging gaps between facilitator and student experiences of (or connection to) Hip Hop. This included explicitly naming their lack of cultural knowledge, positioning themselves as learners, and allowing youth to take on expert roles.[100] Consistent with wider Hip Hop and well-being literature,[101] this both empowered students and enabled genuine rapport-building. Thus, while engaging facilitators from the Hip Hop community may be ideal, facilitators' willingness to position themselves openly in relation to the culture

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[96] Williams et al., 71.

[97] Paukste and Harris, 28.

[98] Paukste and Harris, 28.

[99] Romero, 210.

[100] Gonzalez and Hayes; and Olson-McBride and Page.

[101] Edgar H. Tyson, "Rap Music in Social Work Practice with African American and Latino Youth," *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment* 8, no. 4 (2004): 1–21, https://doi.org/10.1300/J137v08n04_01; and Washington.

and acknowledge potentials shifts in power dynamics is equally important. Thus, we recommend practitioners reflect on their own positioning to Hip Hop when preparing themselves for this work.

Implications also emerged around bringing Hip Hop community representatives into formalized settings. Paukste and Harris (2015) state that while students engaged most when rappers were present, youth workers co-facilitating the program reported negative attitudes to the rappers.[102] This reveals an added layer of power dynamics between facilitators from the Hip Hop community and others working in well-being spaces. It also indicates potential bias against Hip Hop within mainstream health services. Such bias emerged in a study by Steve Sussman et al. (1995), who reported a commercial health video represented a more viable option than a rap video, given it offered "a less extreme approach [and] would have a longer shelf-life and be more well-received by adult gatekeepers."[103] Similar biases emerged in schools. Alan Crouch, Heather Robertson, and Patricia Fagan state: "Negotiation of the workshops with school principals […] was complex and included in each setting the need to address significant misconceptions about the nature and intent of the interaction with youth and hip hop performers (sic)."[104] These accounts suggest the need to consider how facilitators from the Hip Hop community may be received by, or engage in, mainstream education/health spaces.

## Positionality of Researchers

As described elsewhere,[105] while some authors positioned themselves and their research in relation to Hip Hop, many made little or no mention of the culture and any potential connections. The need for transparent positionality seems critical given Hip Hop culture is bound so closely to discourses around race, privilege, and cultural worldviews that challenge dominant Western discourse. Therefore, when a researcher engages with Hip Hop, they also enter a space that requires interaction with these discourses. This places an onus on researchers to not only position their study in relation to Hip Hop, but also consider and acknowledge how their own sociocultural positioning interfaces with the discourses the culture speaks to. As H. Richard Milner writes, "dangers seen, unseen, and unforeseen can emerge for researchers when they do

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[102] Paukste and Harris.
[103] Sussman et al., 1155.
[104] Crouch, Robertson, and Fagan, 35.
[105] Crooke, Comte, and Moreno-Almeida.

not pay careful attention to their own and others' racialized and cultural systems of coming to know, knowing, and experiencing the world."[106]

While researcher reflexivity is often associated with humanistic rather than positivist research approaches,[107] we advocate all research in this space undertake some level of positioning. This is particularly relevant in the present context given researchers explicitly use cultural relevance to influence the well-being of (often marginalized) youth. Thus, ignoring how a researcher's own views or positionality may impact their understandings of how Hip Hop interacts with well-being in schools ignores the potential they may impose or overlay ways of knowing or experiencing this interaction that are inconsistent with those of students. Thus, Hill's, Travis's, and Viega's argument that facilitators critically assess all implications of using Hip Hop for well-being[108] also rings true for researchers: not critically reflecting on and positioning themselves in relation to Hip Hop means researchers may not only miss important context regarding their findings, but also potentially trigger or reinforce views or narratives that can be traumatic or disempowering for youth.

## Conclusion

This paper presents a CIS on research exploring links between Hip Hop and well-being to identify any key understandings or assumptions that underpin this particular field of research. Overall, we found a clear lack of research in this specific area, which was somewhat narrow in scope, and tended more towards public health than other disciplines which have a more established relationship with Hip Hop culture, such as Hip Hop-Based Education (HHBE) and Hip Hop therapy. It seems strange that research looking at Hip Hop and student well-being has not engaged more with fields like HHBE, and we argue for the value of collaboration in this space going forward. Such collaboration would be particularly useful for helping address the lack of discourse we found around cultural relevance. For example, it seems that the concept of "culturally relevant learning" [109] would undoubtedly help support authentic engagement, not to mention well-being outcomes. We also argue the need for

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[106] H. Richard Milner, "Race, Culture, and Researcher Positionality: Working through Dangers Seen, Unseen, and Unforeseen," *Educational Researcher* 36, no. 7 (2007): 388.

[107] Jenny Moore, "A Personal Insight into Researcher Positionality," *Nurse Researcher* 19, no. 4 (2012): 11–14; and Gillian Rose, "Situating Knowledges: Positionality, Reflexivities and Other Tactics," *Progress in Human Geography* 21, no. 3 (1997): 305–320, https://doi.org/10.1191/030913297673302122.

[108] Hill, "Wounded Healing,"; Travis; and Viega.

[109] For more information on the importance of culturally relevant learning in this area, please see Gloria Ladson-Billings, "'Yes, but how do we do it?': Practicing Culturally Relevant Pedagogy," *City Kids, City Schools: More Reports from the Front Row*, edited by William Ayers, 162–177 (New York: W. W. Norton, 2008).

researchers and scholars in this area to engage more critically with how their intervention, practitioners, and the authors themselves are positioned in relation to Hip Hop culture. There is also a need to consider both the implications of the prevalence of rap in school programs, as well as ways to encourage educators and practitioners to engage in other elements.

In summary, our findings illustrate the clear need for a synthesis of ideas, understandings, and approaches, as well as concepts of best practice around engaging Hip Hop culture and or the community in educational settings for well-being. There is also clear need for research and theory in the specific area of Hip Hop and student well-being to look to the field of Hip Hop-Based Education. Research which addresses these points is likely to be best positioned to further expand our understanding of how, when, and why Hip Hop can be used to help improve the well-being of our students.

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