Book Review of
Hip Hop and Spoken Word Therapy in School Counseling: Developing Culturally Responsive Approaches

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Book Reviews

*Hip Hop and Spoken Word Therapy in School Counseling: Developing Culturally Responsive Approaches*

*By Levy, Ian, with a Foreword by Christopher Emdin. New York: Routledge, 2021. Pp. xiv, 146. $39.16*

Dr. Ian Levy’s *Hip Hop and Spoken Word Therapy in School Counseling: Developing Culturally Responsive Approaches* (2021) starts with the author’s ode to Hip Hop, a personal narrative that creates a foundational groundwork for the book. Levy sets the tone for how Hip Hop, counseling, and spoken word therapy can combine to create a culturally responsive experience for students. Levy explains that Hip Hop Spoken Word Therapy (HHSWT), is a “holistic approach to school counseling” based on “five years of practice as a school counselor, as well as an additional three years as a counselor educator” (4). HHSWT brings together “elements of counseling and hip-hop education to detail the theoretical development, practical implementation and empirical evaluation” to school counseling (4).

In his text, he cites other foundational scholars to lay the groundwork for his theory and contribution to the field. His goals with this text were to talk about his time as a practitioner, lover of Hip Hop, and how to implement Hip Hop and spoken word therapy in a school setting, particularly within school counseling.

The layout of the text was beneficial and effective in building the reader’s knowledge. Levy took his time explaining Hip Hop culture and its history to claim its importance in education and counseling. By centering the voices and experiences of Brown and Black folks, Levy can dig deeper into Hip Hop’s contribution to his program as a school counselor. Levy does not shy away from talking about the perceptions of Hip Hop and some of its negative histories, instead, he provides a holistic look at the art form. He also made sure to talk in-depth about oppressive practices in education that impact the student’s experience. Levy’s book is divided into seven chapters that contain extensive and excellent references for each chapter. He maps out his programming and school counseling background in each chapter to make his claims and solidify his findings.

Touching on cultural competency and social justice in the first chapter provided background information that is needed to better understand Levy’s goals throughout the text (15). Levy is clear in his assertion that in order to truly do school counseling one must be culturally competent and be aware of the injustices that one’s students face. This is how a school counselor can effectively impact their student body. The notion and implications of the importance of care are made clear throughout the text. Levy states that “when working with Black and Brown youth, school counselors pull from their inherently educational and counseling identity to authentically understand youth’s lived
experiences, identities, and context to co-construct a path towards a holistic development” (17).

In chapter two, Levy maps out his pilot study for his HHSWT course. He explains his curriculum and its significance to “aid students in developing stress coping skills” (27). Using Hip Hop and spoken word as an outlet will address the possible emotional stress adolescents face in their communities and at school. Levy focused on emotional themes and group activities to facilitate his HHSWT course. He used quantitative data to identify and explore the changes in his student’s “emotional self-awareness, perceived stress and stress coping skill development” (31). After mapping out his pilot study, he talks about the importance of authenticity and the role of “realness” as a school counselor. Levy asserts that the authenticity in Hip Hop can translate to lessons and programs for school counseling. This level of authenticity makes Black and Brown students less leery of counseling professionals. Levy expresses how important it is to create genuine relationships with students, something that is at the core of a good school counselor. The counselor’s authenticity should not be mistaken for cultural appropriation, which Levy unpacks extensively in chapter three. The act of appropriation, as Levy explains, can be seen in the trendier aspects of combining Hip Hop and education. That is not the purpose or goal of his programming, and he discusses in length how to avoid appropriation of Hip Hop in educational settings. He calls this “cultural humility” (43), which is the effort to resist appropriation and work towards developing real relationships with students.

One of his most revealing chapters was chapter four, where Levy explains the importance of co-creating counseling spaces with youth. This activity allows students to have autonomy over how their space looks and feels, and what it represents for them. It makes it a safe space for them and a place they can take pride in. Levy gives real-life examples of how he raised funds to assist students with co-creating the counseling office. Students made that space into their own mock recording studio and were able to use that space to record some of their own music with the support of staff. This chapter stands out because it brings in a communal practice that instills a sense of care for students. Loyalty and family are two themes that show up constantly in Hip Hop culture and by creating a space with students, Hip Hop counseling praxis is at play in real-time.

Towards the end of the book, Levy discusses future goals for HHSWT. He is aware of some of the limitations of this monograph such as the small sample sizes in his studies, but I believe he can consult other counselors to bring HHSWT to their schools over time. I would love to see how Levy can incorporate some of Ruth Nicole Brown’s Hip Hop feminist pedagogy into future HHSWT programs. This text is a great starting point for all school counselors to learn how to create a more culturally responsive counseling program that embodies Hip Hop culture, spoken word, social justice, and authentic relationship building. Hip Hop can be a major influence in making pedagogy and therapy more relatable to young learners and can connect them to their educators and counselors.

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