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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Personal and environmental change: A Hip Hop school counseling intervention

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Abstract

Scholars criticize the profession of school counseling for the delivery of inadequate school counseling services to Black and Brown youth. Within schools, particularly those populated by Black and Brown youth, exist environmental barriers to youths' wellness and development including a shortage of mental health professionals (i.e., high student-to-counselor ratios) or oppressive school structures (i.e., deficit-oriented curriculum and discipline policies). This case study examined the use of a culturally responsive and theoretically sound Hip Hop and school counseling intervention that captures the experiences of students and adult participants. The results from this study help illustrate how the school studio, as a liberatory space, offered a hospitable environment that invited students' authentic identity expression, fostered increased relationships with staff and their peers, and offered students a sense of confidence or personal empowerment.

KEYWORDS

counseling theory, hip hop school counseling, interventions, school counseling, school systems

INTRODUCTION

Mental health challenges for students were exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic, and historically marginalized adolescents have experienced disproportionate mental health stressors, including the loss of community-based services (McKim & Sternberg, 2021), the experience of grief and loss (Gilbert et al., 2020), and feelings of stress and anxiety (Hoyt et al., 2021). Within schools, particularly those populated by Black and Brown youth, exist environmental barriers to wellness and development, including a shortage of mental health professionals (i.e., high student-to-counselor ratios; Hilts et al., 2023; Savitz-Romer & Nicola, 2022), or oppressive school structures (i.e., deficit-oriented curriculum and discipline policies; Emdin,, 2016; Love, 2019).

Amid these mental health concerns, scholars criticize the profession of school counseling for the delivery of inadequate school counseling services to Black and Brown youth (Holcomb-Mccoy, 2007). These scholars suggest that many school counselors lack cultural competence (Nelson et al., 2015) and employ counseling frameworks that are not responsive to complex societal forces or students' intersecting identities (Singh et al., 2020). To meet the needs of Black and Brown youth in schools, contemporary approaches to school counseling have highlighted the importance of both anti-racist and culturally responsive practices (Holcomb-McCoy, 2022).

The school counseling literature also offers some evidence about the mental health benefits of preventative and developmentally centered counseling supports, including direct and indirect services that influence the broader school climate and environment (Lemberger-Truelove & Bowers Parker, 2023), but there remains a need for the practical examination of culturally responsive school counseling intervention research (Griffith et al., 2019), which is rooted in school counseling theory (Kim et al., 2024). Therefore, this study assesses the impact of a theoretically rooted and culturally sensitive school counseling intervention on youth outcomes

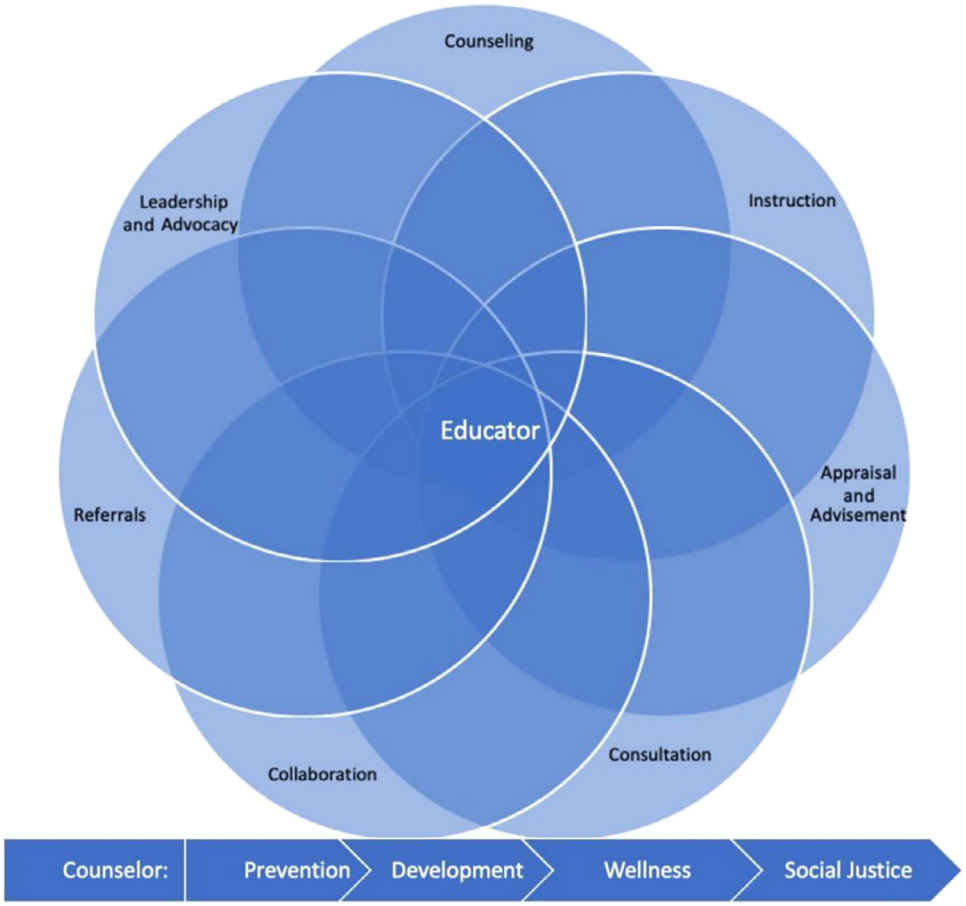

FIGURE 1 School counselors' roles and responsibilities. *Note*: An educator-counselor identity for school counseling is nondual and nonhierarchical (Borrowed from Levy & Lemberger-Truelove, 2021).

and school climate. In this study, the authors review literature related to the school counselor's identity and the need for theory in school counseling intervention research, to present a case study of a school counselor delivered Hip Hop school counseling intervention.

The school counselors' role as an interventionist

This study utilizes the EducatorCounselor identity (Levy & Lemberger-Truelove, 2021) to define the roles and responsibilities of school counselors as they engage in the delivery of interventions. EducatorCounselors are operationalized as individuals who take up culturally responsive educational services (individual and group counseling, instruction, leadership, advocacy, collaborations, and consultation, etc.) to meet the goals of a counselor in schools (bolstering a school's capacity to be preventative, consistently focused on youth development and wellness, and to ensure that the schooling experience is socially just). See Figure 1 for a visual representation of this framework. In this way, we are suggesting that contemporary school counseling must transcend the office and, as part of school ecosystems, school counselors must participate in a wide range of educator tasks to create socially just and hospitable school environments that support youth's development and wellness.

Notable school counseling research supports the Educator-Counselor identity. For example, Whiston et al. (2011) completed a 25-year meta-analysis of 150 school counseling studies, suggesting student outcomes were statistically higher for those receiving direct counseling services (particularly counseling in offices and via classroom instruction) compared to those who did not. Researchers also suggest that school counselors can support youth's mental health and wellness through indirect and preventative services within educational environments. These include but are not limited to the development, implementation, and evaluation of culturally responsive multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) that strengthen collaboration between teachers, counselors, and leaders (Betters-Bubon et al., 2019; Hines et al., 2023) toward the establishment of asset-rich and protective school environments (Bryan et al., 2020). Additional research suggests school counselors can engage in leadership and advocacy within schools to combat systemic inequities that threaten youth's mental health and well-being (Hipolito-Delgado et al., 2021).

While there exists evidence that school counselors can positively impact student outcomes, not limited to disciplinary

improvements, especially among culturally diverse, economically disadvantaged, or academically struggling students (Domina et al., 2022; Mulhern, 2023), school counselors often find themselves inundated with administrative or noncounseling tasks (Blake, 2020) and struggle to articulate how their practices are rooted in school counseling theory (Kim et al., 2024). For example, a 20-year meta-analysis of 45 school counseling intervention studies found that only 20% consisted of interventions with a clear theoretical foundation (Kim et al., 2024).

This empirical evidence demonstrates school counselors who carry out the EducatorCounselor identity and engage through a range of direct and indirect tasks within school environments, working directly with students and adults, can have a notable influence on both students and the entire school system. Therefore, this study explores the impact of a theoretically grounded school counseling intervention in creating culturally responsive development and prevention services in schools.

ADVOCATING STUDENT-WITHIN-ENVIRONMENT THEORY AND INTERVENTION RESEARCH

School counselors working through the lens of a nondual educator-counselor identity strive toward building a supportive system through advocacy of conditions needed for equity and inclusion while developing student and staff capacities by delivering prevention services at the entire school level. This work of school counseling is grounded in the Advocating Student-within-Environment theory (ASE; Lemberger-Truelove & Bowers, 2019), which serves as the theoretical framework for this study. The ASE theory is grounded in the core belief that school counseling interventions must simultaneously support the development of youths' internal capacities and create educational environments that support their authentic development. This theoretical framework enables scholars to enhance the effectiveness of school counseling, validate and strengthen the understanding of mechanisms behind evidence-based practices, and allow school counselors to adapt their approaches to be culturally responsive and meet the unique needs of their students (Lemberger-Truelove & Bowers Parker, 2023; Lemberger-Truelove et al., 2019). As such, several ASE-inspired intervention researchers have demonstrated school counselor-led direct and indirect services lead to positive outcomes for students and adult stakeholders by leading to the promotion of curiosity and compassion in hopes of cultivating a safe environment of connection and acceptance (Molina et al., 2022, 2023; Ceballos et al., 2021; Lemberger-Truelove et al., 2023; Palacios & Lemberger-Truelove, 2019).

In the spirit of ASE, researchers also suggest that school counselors who implement creative and expressive based classroom lessons and/or small groups with youth (i.e., Hip Hop music making or podcasting) as well as engage key stakeholders in schools can support the emergence of youth's authentic storytelling and emotional processing within school environments that have placed barriers around their actualization (Levy & Adjapong, 2020; Levy & Bell, 2024; Edirmanasinghe et al., 2022). In many ways, ASE research shifts the focus of the school counselor from treating the individual to counseling school systems to foster the environment for youth to maximize their internal capacity. This aim aligns with the role of the school counselor, as an Educator-Counselor whose intervention work engages all parts of the school ecosystem toward prevention, development, wellness, and social justice. Thus, there is a need for culturally responsive school counseling interventions that adhere to school counseling theory and respond to the contemporary cultural and social forces that affect youth.

HIP HOP SCHOOL COUNSELING INTERVENTIONS

Outside of the field of school counseling, and primarily documented in social work literature, youth report finding the use of rap and Hip Hop in counseling to be more culturally appropriate and relatable than traditional forms of talk therapy, where listening to and discussing different Hip Hop songs, engaging in therapeutic beat making, or composing lyrics about emotional themes are deemed effective in supporting well-being (Elligan, 2004; Gonzalez & Hayes, 2009; Travis et al., 2019; Tyson, 2002). More recently, a systematic review of 10 Hip Hop and rap music well-being intervention studies between 2011 and 2022 noted increases in emotional awareness, empowerment, and the ability to process difficult emotions for clients (Jefferson et al., 2024). While valuable, this research mostly focuses on in-office counseling (i.e., the provision of individual and small-group counseling).

However, emerging school counseling literature concerning the use of Hip Hop school counseling interventions (Levy 2021) helps to illustrate how Hip Hop cultural practices (i.e., lyric writing, mixtape making, or studio creation) can pervade the roles and responsibilities of school counselors (i.e., counseling, instruction, leadership, and advocacy), which enable it to be a culturally responsive approach for educational systems specifically. For example, Hip Hop lyric writing can serve as a culturally responsive cognitive and emotive journaling tool, taught via school counselor-led classroom instruction, for youth to process lived experiences. Lyric writing as emotive is evidenced as helpful in increasing emotional self-awareness and stress-coping skills (Levy 2019). Or, in a group counseling setting, the Hip Hop practice of mixtape creation, where youth are charged with turning research on social justice issues that have a negative impact on their lived experience into Hip Hop music/albums that can be shared as advocacy (Levy et al., 2018). This process, the Critical Cycle of Mixtape Creation (CCMC), is documented as effective in reducing stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms in youth (Levy & Adjapong, 2020). As a leadership and advocacy effort, Levy & Adjapong (2020) described how youth

and a school counselor together constructed a school recording studio as a physical location for emotional support. A focus group analysis of the physical construction of the environment revealed that students experienced the 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 sum, various Hip Hop and school counseling studies above have showcased how self-reflection and exploration can foster curiosity about a student's own thoughts and feelings (Levy, et al., 2018, 2020; Washington, 2021). However, scholars have also highlighted how Hip Hop as a culturally responsive approach can support youth advocacy and the challenging of oppressive systems (Akom, 2009; Levy & Wong, 2022; Lipset & Low, 2022). While these disparate works suggest the usefulness of Hip Hop interventions in spurring the development of youth's internal capacities as well as how Hip Hop interventions can support youth in ameliorating barriers in school systems, there are no Hip Hop studies that focus simultaneously on students and the school environment as co-determinants of experience. Said another way, the current body of school counseling research illustrates how each school counselor or EducatorCounselor role can be carried out through Hip Hop methods, but there is room for the exploration of a singular Hip Hop intervention that intentionally merges varied educator tasks to support the goals of the counselor (prevention, development, wellness, and social justice). Additionally, there are no Hip Hop and school counseling intervention studies that explore adherence to a school counseling theory such as ASE, which would ground the work of the EducatorCounselor in a commitment to supporting youth outcomes and affect their school systems. Therefore, this case study aims to address the gap in culturally responsive and theoretically sound school counseling interventions that capture the experiences of student and adult participants in Hip Hop studio/intervention.

METHODS

The purpose of this case study was to understand the experiences of students and adults who participated in the Hip Hop-based school counseling intervention study, wherein a school counselor worked with a group of Black and Brown students and staff to co-construct and make music in a Hip Hop recording studio in their school. To best understand the students' and staff's lived experiences while participating in this intervention, the authors developed the following research question: How do students and school staff perceive the impact of the Hip Hop school studio intervention?

A case study design

The authors selected a qualitative case study (a single-case design) to explore the experiences of students and school staff who engaged in the creation and facilitation of a Hip Hop school studio intervention. A qualitative case study is marked by a thorough analysis of a particular phenomenon (a Hip Hop school studio intervention) within a bounded system (an NYC high school), considering multiple layers and contexts (Stake, 2013; Yin, 2014). Specifically, a Hip Hop studio was co-constructed by a group of youth, a teacher, and the PI (a school counselor educator), guided by the structures and documented efficacy of the use of Hip Hop studios as therapeutic environments (Levy & Adjapong, 2020) for youth to access Hip Hop and school counseling interventions (Levy, 2021) in their school. The authors selected a case study, given the limited research on the impact of Hip Hop studios on youth development and/or school culture and research that posits most school counseling interventions are implemented without a theoretical foundation (Kim et al., 2024). An exploratory approach was essential to understand the experiences of individuals within Hip Hop school studios and understand the potential for studios to impact youth outcomes and affect school systems (i.e., congruence between ASE theory and Hip Hop school counseling interventions). As an inherently exploratory method, the case study was chosen as it is "an empirical method that investigates a contemporary phenomenon ('the case') in depth and within its real-world context, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident" (Yin, 2014, p. 16).

While the focus of this intervention was to support youth development, the case study itself was interested in understanding how students and school staff experienced the Hip Hop studio within the context of their school system (Maxwell, 2013). To effectively explore the case, the researchers drew on existing counseling literature which suggests the use of a descriptive phenomenological (constructivist) approach that positions the researchers to make sense of how participants lived experiences inform their construction of knowledge (Merlin-Knoblick & Camp, 2018; Prosak & Gibson, 2021). While case study scholars have clearly indicated there is no defined or preferred method for data collection/analysis (Stake, 2013; Yin, 2014), qualitative methodologists recommend utilizing a descriptive analysis to highlight themes or patterns that emerge from the data (Hays & Singh, 2012; Stake, 2013).

Research team positionality

As an initial step, the researchers must recognize their assumptions and biases regarding the Hip Hop school studio intervention (Hays & Singh, 2012; Yin, 2014). The research team included two counselor educators. The lead author identifies as a White male school counselor educator who has prior experience implementing Hip Hop-based interventions as a school counselor and was the interventionist in this study functioning in the role of school counselor. As a researcher and CIS heterosexual man, he engages in constant interrogation of the ways his identities impact his implementation

and evaluation of interventions. He believes deeply in the use of Hip Hop interventions in school counseling and holds concerns about the school counseling profession's lack of unique school counseling theory and intervention research. Recognizing these biases, he undertakes this study to further understand the power of Hip Hop and school counseling intervention research. Theoretically, he has historically pulled from humanistic and ecological frameworks while both recognizing and advocating for a stand-alone school counseling theory that supports school counselors in challenging inequities in school systems and supporting youth's individual development.

The second author identifies as a Latina counselor educator with a deep understanding of the cultural nuances and challenges that low income and minoritized students face. Additionally, her experiences as a public school educator and school counselor drive her commitment to culturally responsive evidence-based school counseling interventions. These experiences and approaches are central to her research and practice, which prioritize teacher/student relationship development and school counselor training that elevates advocacy within inequitable systems.

Both researchers acknowledge that their interests in supporting the school counseling profession in engaging in intervention research, as well as the potential for ASE to offer a solution to the absence of school counseling theory to guide research, may have an impact on their interpretations of the results of this case study.

The case: A Hip Hop studio counseling intervention

The *setting:*

This case study examines a Hip Hop school studio intervention implemented by a school counselor educator at a New York City High School, which will be referred to as Midtown High School (MHS; pseudonym). At the time of the intervention, the MHS student body of 371 youth identified as Hispanic (61.7%), Black (26.5%), White (3.8%), Asian (2.7%), American Indian/Alaska Native (1.1%), Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander (.03%), and two or more races (4.0%). A total of 85% of the student body were economically disadvantaged, qualifying for free or reduced lunch.

Participant demographics

The participants (N = 9) for this case study consisted of students (n = 5) and staff (n = 4). The students (n = 5) self-identified as male (n = 4) and female (n = 1), Latine (n = 4), and Black or African American (n = 1), and were in grades 9 (n = 2), 11 (n = 1), and 12 (n = 2). The staff (n = 4) were a White and Male-identifying principal, a Latine and male-identifying special education teacher, a Black and female-identifying teacher, and a White and male-identifying dean.

The Hip Hop school studio intervention

To facilitate the Hip Hop and school studio intervention, the lead author (a school counselor and counselor educator) worked with students and school staff on identifying an unused storage room in the back of their school library that could be converted into a recording studio and underwent a process where they co-created the studio and used it to create music about their lived experiences. The delivery of the intervention in this study is grounded in the role of the school counselor, defined as the EducatorCounselor. Meaning, the construction of the studio represents the convergence of varied EducatorCounselor tasks such as small-group counseling, leadership and advocacy, appraisal and advisement, collaboration, and instruction. The intervention is detailed here to describe the convergence of these roles around the act of studio construction.

The principal of a New York City High School consulted with the school counselor on developing a school studio. Drawing on his experiences as a school counselor and school counselor educator, to guide the Hip Hop studio intervention, he drew from an existing Hip Hop small-group curriculum outlined by Levy et al. (2018, 2020) to engage youth and school staff in the research and creation of both a school studio and series of songs within their school building. Leaning into the school counseling role related to collaboration as well as appraisal and advisement, the school counselor conversed with the principal to pinpoint what students and staff might be a good fit for the studio construction process.

The school counselor hosted an introductory meeting, as classroom instruction, with a large group of potentially interested students and staff, resulting in commitments from a group of five students and four staff (two teachers, a dean, and a principal), each with skills and/or interest in music making and studio creation. Following this recruitment, and the collection of consent/assent forms, the small-group process ran for 15 weeks, after-school for 90 min each week, where youth, in collaboration with school staff, moved through studio construction (weeks 1–5), researching, planning, writing songs (weeks 6–10), and recording music (weeks 11–15). Practically, this involved tasks such as installing studio foam, setting up LED lights, arranging furniture, and selecting studio equipment and computer software. This studio creation process was primarily led by the youth themselves, who provided guidance to the dean, principal, and teachers on procuring the necessary materials for their artistic pursuits. Once the studio was operational, the students convened after school once a week to engage in artistic endeavors. This small-group counseling process, facilitated mainly by the school counselor, involved identifying a common emotional theme, selecting a corresponding beat, researching songs by favorite artists on the same theme, composing lyrics, and recording their songs.

The staff participants held a variety of roles during this group process. During their small-group music making, one of the teachers collaborated with the students and school counselor, offering their skills as a pianist to help create music

that students could rap over. Additionally, some of the youth indicated an interest in creating a mural within the studio, and the principal recommended the school counselor consult with an art teacher to assist with the design and painting of the mural. Once the students had completed a song they wished to share with the school community, the principal and school counselor organized a leadership and advocacy effort where the students got on the loudspeaker during homeroom to introduce and play their song for the school community. In sum, using the facilitation of this Hip Hop school studio intervention, the school counselor pulled from a variety of EducatorCounselor tasks to activate youth as leaders in a studio co-construction process alongside school staff.

Data collection

Researchers collected qualitative data through audio recordings of interviews with both students and staff, utilizing separate interview protocols. After the completion of the Hip Hop school studio intervention, the first author met with all participants (N = 9) individually for 60-min semi-structured interviews about their experiences engaging in and with the studio, the key source of data for this case study (Yin, 2014). Two interview scripts were developed for the students and staff. Using the two scripts as a guide, the researcher engaged in reflexive interviewing, asking the participants open-ended questions and follow-up questions to support further processing of the experience (Roulston, 2010). Some examples of the questions from the school staff interview script (n = 4) included: "How have students responded to the studio?" "What influence do you believe the school studio has had on the community and culture?" "How has the studio influenced the relationships between students and school staff/teachers?" "Have you noticed any changes in how students regulate their behaviors?" Conversely, some examples of student interview questions (n = 5) included: "What has it meant to you to have the studio in the school?" "How has the studio impacted your relationship with teachers or staff in the building?" "Tell me about what it was like to build/create the studio?" "How do you think the studio has impacted your behavior in the school?" Each of the interview questions, for both students and staff, were theoretically grounded in ASE. In their wording, the researcher attempted to understand how the Hip Hop studio intervention impacted youth outcomes and affected their school system. All interviews occurred in person within an MHS office and were audio recorded on the first authors' device before being downloaded and transcribed prior to data analysis.

Data analysis

As an approach to data analysis, the researchers aimed to uncover patterns in the participant interviews that represented overarching themes describing the Hip Hop school studio intervention experience (Stake, 2013). Therefore, both researchers individually transcribed the data into separate documents, thoroughly reviewed the content, and independently identified codes to describe the experiences of participants. This included an independent tallying of the frequency with which a given code appeared in an interview transcript. These codes were categorized under sub-themes, each representing a common thread between the codes, and were further grouped under overarching themes (Saldaña, 2013). While each researcher initially conducted this process independently to elucidate the participants' perceptions and experiences, they later convened to reconcile disparities in their findings and collaboratively establish an initial list of themes/subthemes (Roulston, 2010). Then, the researchers sent the marked transcriptions and initial lists of themes/subthemes to a colleague who had not been involved in data collection or the intervention to act as an outside auditor (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Finally, the researchers met again to review the auditor's notes and concretize a final list of themes/subthemes (see Table 1).

TABLE 1 A numerical count of each different participant comment by theme (T) and subtheme (S).

Themes and subthemes	N
A Space for Liberation (T)	16
A Hospitable Environment (S)	7
Opportunities for Authentic Expression (S)	9
Bolstering Relationships (T)	14
Increased Student and Staff Rapport (S)	8
Sense of Belonging with Peers (S)	7
Personal Empowerment (S)	5

Trustworthiness

The research team employed several strategies to enhance the credibility and reliability of their data (Hays & Singh, 2012). In practicing reflexivity during data collection and analysis, the researchers acknowledged and addressed biases through continuous self-reflection. The PI recognized their privileged position as a White researcher while also striving to amplify the perspectives and experiences of school-aged students and staff benefiting from school counseling practices. All team members embraced bracketing, setting aside their preconceived notions about the study phenomena before analyzing the data (Carpenter, 2007). Specifically, they maintained a reflexive diary to document their thoughts, emotions, and biases throughout the research process (Hays & Singh, 2012).

While there are inherent risks in the PI taking on the role of interventionist in a case study, the extended engagement between the PI and participants can foster the trust needed to gather genuine insights into participants' experiences (Hays & Singh, 2012). Moreover, the lead researcher enlisted a counselor educator, who had no prior involvement in the program, to act as an auditor (Patton, 2015). This auditor was tasked with scrutinizing the team's work to identify any overlooked codes or themes, thereby enhancing the rigor and agreement in the final thematic analysis (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Subsequently, the first two authors met to review the auditor's feedback and then revised and finalized the thematic list. Additionally, to enhance credibility, we established

an audit trail documenting the research process, allowing for the study to be replicated or expanded upon (Hays & Singh, 2012). Through these rigorous processes, the researchers assert that they achieved trustworthiness in line with qualitative inquiry standards (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011).

RESULTS

A descriptive data analysis of student and staff interviews answered our research question: How do students and school staff perceive the impact of the Hip Hop school studio intervention? Students and staff reported a total of two overarching themes, containing a total of five subthemes, that suggested the studio offered: (1) A Space for Liberation, which contained the subthemes of (a) A Hospitable Environment and (b) Opportunities for Authentic Expression, and (2) Bolstering Relationships, which contained the subthemes of (a) Increased Student and Staff Rapport, (b) a Sense of Belonging with Peers, and (c) Personal Empowerment. Select quotes from students and staff are used below to illustrate each theme.

A Space for Liberation

The first overarching theme of *A Space for Liberation* contained two subthemes: A Hospitable Environment and Opportunities for Authentic Expression. This theme was represented by quotes from students and staff that illustrated how the Hip Hop studio intervention offered youth a platform to create a culturally relevant environment, drawing on their internal knowledge and skills, that both connected them with schooling in ways they had not before, and offered them opportunities to engage in genuine self-expression. The Hip Hop studio itself presented youth with a physical space to create and emote authentically in culturally congruent ways, outside of the confines of their traditional schooling experience. Comments from the four students (Student A, B, C, and D), a teacher, the dean, and the principal are highlighted to describe each of these themes.

Hospitable Environment

When recounting the creation of the Hip Hop studio, students and staff spoke about the physical construction of the studio and the impact that engaging within this space had on the students. Collectively, the students and staff suggest that the Hip Hop studio functioned as a hospitable environment that was comfortable (physically and emotionally) and offered them a source of connection with schooling. For example, Student A talked about the importance of the design choices they and their peers made when constructing the studio:

> Like from seeing and how it was, to see it, to see it how it is now, it's crazy. It was just some boring room. No ideas, we been in there, spiced it up, and now it really look. The LED lights, the bean bags. I know we gonna get a couch, but I definitely like, we should keep the bean bags in there. The pictures on the wall. Yeah. And it's all the other people that's in there too. Like if you got people with good vibes, good energy, good intentions, it's going become perfect.

In this quote, the student reflects on transforming a boring room in the school, where no ideas existed, into a creative environment where his peers showed up with good energy and intentions. He specifically notes the LED lights, bean bags, and the pictures (of rappers that they selected), as well as the good people in the room, as parts of a recipe for creating a hospitable environment.

Similarly, Student C, when processing the importance of the physical studio space, commented:

> Like I said, it makes me want to go to school. It makes me want to experience school. Like I see it a different way 'cause like a lot of people, they can come to school and be like, I'm ready to go home'.

This student credited the studio environment with igniting his interest in seeing and experiencing school in a more positive or inviting way. The school principal's comments were aligned with the students, who described the studio as an untraditional space that created an organic connection with the school building. Specifically, the principal commented:

> There are certain things we can't change. I can't re-brick the whole school, it's never gonna happen, I can try to cover it up with stuff and color it. But the studio feels like a completely different space, something completely new, completely away from any traditional sense of what we usually see in the building. Absolutely is, absolutely is a point of connection for students.

In this quote, the principal is speaking about the studio as a unique space that challenged the conventional school environment and was a source of connection for students. A teacher also noticed the importance of the studio space for students, suggesting that it was an environment that made them want to be in the building. The teacher stated:

> For sure now because we have the studio, they wanna be in the building even more, so … You know what I mean? So, they're spending more time here with us. Then in the meantime, they stay more for school activities 'cause now they got [the studio]' … They know the building and more staff inside even more now. So, it is like been connecting them more with the building overall.

The teacher described the studio as an environment that kept youth in the building. By spending more time in school, the teacher felt that the studio helped students form a connection with their teachers and the building/community itself.

Opportunities for Authentic Expression

The second subtheme within A Space for Liberation illuminated how the hospitable environment that students created offered them opportunities for authentic expression. Quotes for the subtheme of *Opportunities for Authentic Expression* contained statements from students and staff elucidating a sense of empowerment for genuine communication and sharing of emotions that youth felt within the studio. When describing being in the studio, Student B stated:

> People can get their like, their like, people get their emotions out without having to fight, argue. Just put it on the, put it on the music and, like I said, it's super accessible. You can just go upstairs, knock your song out and it's a good vibe.

In this quote, the student claims that the studio functioned as a place within the school building where they were free to express their feelings. The student draws a contrast between the physical ways emotions can sometimes be processed (i.e., fighting or arguing), suggesting the studio offered a healthier outlet (i.e., good vibe) where students could express genuine emotions without restrictions.

Building upon these sentiments, the teacher who supported the studio process suggested that they saw students develop more control over their emotions, in addition to an increased focus while in school. Specifically, the teacher said:

> I do see it, especially in a few students, you know that when they came in here, they had a little issue controlling themself and controlling the emotion, like I mentioned before. Now, I could see them, they probably … They focus more too, you know what I mean?

In this sense, not only was the studio an environment where students could comfortably express themselves but also one where they actively practiced regulating their emotions. The school principal also shared thoughts about the students' ability to communicate more effectively within the studio, stating:

> Specifically, it's created a space where students who need an outlet to communicate have been able to do so. If they weren't able to do so in a classroom or with a staff member, they've had that space to creatively release things they need to.

The principal perceived the studio as a creative outlet that allowed students to share thoughts and feelings with staff members that they might not have within traditional classroom spaces in the school.

Bolstering Relationships

The second overarching theme of *Bolstering Relationships* contained three subthemes: Fostered Student and Staff Rapport, A Sense of Belonging with Peers, and Personal Empowerment. This overarching theme was represented by quotes from students and staff that described how the Hip Hop studio intervention fosters youth's relationship with staff (teachers, the dean, the principal, etc.), with each other, and helped to instill a sense of personal empowerment within themselves. The quotes explored in the following subsections illustrate the inter- and intrapersonal development that occurred within the studio, where youth felt a sense of comfort, belonging, and that their cultural forms of expression were welcomed.

Fostered Student and Staff Rapport

Within the school studio, where youth found the environment comfortable and welcoming of their authentic emotional expression, students and staff also reported experiencing increased rapport with school staff. The subtheme of *Fostered Student and Staff Rapport* is defined by student and staff quotes that illustrate positive changes in student and staff relationships. For example, when discussing their interactions with teachers around the studio, Student D noted:

> I actually like it 'cause I like when my teachers say my music's good, they like a certain song. So, I actually like it when they encourage me, tell me to keep doing it. Don't stop. For example, Mr. Z, Mrs. A, told me, Don't let people bring you outta your courage to keep rapping. So, if you wanna keep rapping, just keep doing it. Don't stop.

Student C similarly stated, "I never really talked to Mr. Z like that … I never really talked to him but like ever since the studio started, I feel like I gained a better relationship with him. 'Cause we have something in common." In these quotes, the students are sharing a sense of encouragement and closeness they felt from teachers that they had not felt prior to engaging in the school studio.

The students' feelings are reciprocated by the staff. For example, the dean commented that they appreciated the studio environment for allowing them to see and interact with students beyond the punitive context of their role:

> 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 to be

> 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 dean's statement helps illustrate how the studio's support of students' authentic expression allowed them to see the students more fully and thus develop a deeper connection with them. In essence, the opportunity for youth to engage with Hip Hop as a culturally appropriate form of expression enabled the dean to see and connect with youth in a more genuine way. When reflecting on his teaching staff's relationships with youth, the principal supported the dean's position, saying "Maybe now going to math class to Mr. Z or something where it's like, Oh, yeah, we were in the studio together, and now I feel more comfortable with you. So, I do see that impact." Here, the principal is alluding to the power of the studio space to foster authentic relationships between youth and teachers that can positively influence interactions in classrooms and other parts of the school building.

Sense of Belonging with Peers

Beyond staff and student relationships, students also reported a *sense of belonging* with their peers in and around the school studio, defined by quotes for this subtheme highlighting the impact the Hip Hop studio intervention had on students' relationships and ability to build community with one another. When working together in the studio, youth shared an appreciation for their collective work toward creating music. Student A said, "Cause we're working together now, especially people you never worked with. Y'all both now working together trying to make something that's great. There's no rivalry, no fighting, no violence, and then everybody's just cool as one." This particular quote speaks to the sense of community and collaboration that students built together within the studio. This community extended beyond the studio itself, however, as student quotes highlighted the role that the studio (and the students who created it) held within the school at large. Reflecting on the impact of the studio, Student C shared a sense of pride and ownership they had over the studio space in the school community, stating:

> Like we started the studio. We got the word around. So, like, I feel like, yeah, like people come to us they want to check in, get some time. There's people that I never thought would want to do music, come up to me and ask to make a song there.

So, beyond developing relationships while collaborating in the studio, students recognized the studio as a resource within the school building to foster peer to peer connections within the student body.

The school staff felt similarly about the impact the studio had on peer relationships. Inside the studio, a teacher marveled at the connections that students developed:

> Now it's like they have their own little group. They stay together. Like I mentioned, it's like seniors and freshmen now mixed. We really didn't see… We don't see that. But now because the… In the music, they like spreading their friendship all over and out of school. They're meeting new kids, they're helping new kids, they're helping each other stay outta trouble. They talk to each other, they share their ideas, whatever thinking they got going on.

The teacher was appreciative of the relationships that developed across grade levels, and how those friendships spilled out into the larger school ecosystem. In this way, the studio functioned as a point of connection for students to develop relationships and support each other in ways that they had not done prior to having a safe space. The dean saw this as well, sharing those students held each other accountable in hallways and classrooms to ensure that they were able to show up and finish their songs in the studio together:

> That has definitely happened 'cause they communicate more a lot'. And because of the studio, if one student is lagging or hanging in the class, hanging in the hallway, this other studio buddy will grab him up. 'Yo let's go to class. We gotta go to class. We doing the studio this afternoon, remember? We got studio time today.

Overall, the school studio bolstered relationships and a sense of belonging among the student body. An important note here is that the studio functioned as a birthplace for connection and community building that eventually transcended that immediate environment to affect the school system at large.

Personal empowerment

On a personal level, results also suggested that students developed a deeper relationship with themselves or a sense of self-awareness. Quotes from interviews offered evidence that students felt personally empowered to participate in schooling because of the studio. For example, Student B stated, "it makes me want to go to school. It makes me want to finish my work up. It makes me wanna finish my activities so I know I can go upstairs and just knock out some music." In this quote, the student isn't saying that the studio helped them enjoy school necessarily, but rather that their desire to be in the studio helped them tolerate or preserve through various schoolwork and activities. In fact, the school principal commented that one student participant was more willing to try

to complete academic tasks due to the studio helping him to step outside of his comfort zone. The principal reported:

> Seeing how they are being taken outside of their comfort zone is actually helping develop their skills not only with the music but trying things outside of their comfort zone in like classrooms. [Student]'s a great example. [Student] has never been able to sit still for an entire assessment without some type of intervention or support from an adult. And today he really didn't want to do this test in his global and he made a comment to Ms. A about, he's gonna try it even though he is not comfortable.

Beyond simply tolerating academic tasks, Student D claimed they were performing better in school because they looked forward to the studio, stating, "I feel like I'm doing way better in school … Cause like, I got something to like to look forward to, when I'm done doing my work. I get my work done and I get a song done." The sense that students felt motivated by the studio to complete academic work was also noticed by the dean, who directly mentioned using the studio to help empower students:

> "It's a great talking piece about responsibility in general. Because it's something that" comes with the responsibility of knowing that we're getting your stuff done in school first and foremost. And then knowing that like, 'This is something of an extra place for us to really further explore ourselves. Because if we're not confident what's happening in school, if there's at least a space in the building to be confident in,' then it may bleed over into other spaces.''

This comment from the dean highlights the layered effect the school studio had on students individually. The studio not only helped students cultivate the determination to push through challenging academic tasks but also enabled them to build a sense of confidence in school that they previously struggled to access.

DISCUSSION

This case study sought to explore the lived experiences of students and staff who participated in a Hip Hop school studio intervention by answering a singular research question: How do students and school staff perceive the impact of the Hip Hop school studio intervention? The results from this study help illustrate how the school studio, as a liberatory space, offered a hospitable environment that invited students to authentically express their identity. Having the physical space to express themselves fully, students found increased relationships with staff and their peers, as well as an increased sense of confidence or personal empowerment to participate in schooling. This offers readers insight into the impact of a contemporary school counseling intervention. In particular, a culturally responsive and theory informed school counseling intervention that aimed to promote wellness, student development, and social justice in schools and the broader community (Kim et al., 2024; Li et al., 2024). Moreover, this study helps to evidence the role of the school counselor as EducatorCounselor, transcending solely in-office individual and or group counseling to consider how to preventatively serve youth's wellness through engaging in various educational tasks across school ecosystems (Levy & Lemberger-Truelove, 2021). In the current study, it is illustrated that the facilitation of the Hip Hop school studio intervention required the school counselor to take on the EducatorCounselor identity by leading a small group to construct the studio and process emotions through music making, collaborating, and consulting with educators in the school building, engaging in leadership and advocacy, leading classroom instruction, and practicing appraisal and advisement.

Considering the growth of school counseling research that is wedded to theory, this study supports the use of a Hip Hop school studio intervention as a theoretically sound approach grounded in ASE, especially for culturally diverse adolescent students. For example, results support literature suggesting that Hip Hop studios function as therapeutic environments where Black and Brown youth can access comfort and belonging, opportunities for peer support and collaboration, and outlets for emotional expression for youth (Levy & Adjapong, 2020). Results from staff and student interviews in the current study also suggested that students experienced an increased ability to interrogate their internal experiences with curiosity, a major principle of ASE, and to express themselves in a more self-regulated and authentic manner (Lemberger-Truelove & Bowers Parker, 2023). This finding mirrors prior research on Hip Hop interventions within educational settings that have found Hip Hop to be a humanistically rooted approach that supports youth's authentic storytelling (Akom, 2009; Levy & Adjapong, 2020; Washington, 2021), as well as research suggesting ASE-grounded interventions support "changes in students' expression of emotions, enhanced self-control over cognitive responses" (Ceballos et al., 2021, p. 72). This study amplifies the utility of Hip Hop interventions in schools as an anti-racist approach where Black and Brown youth can partner with school counselors and other building educators to create systemic changes that establish practical avenues for authentic self-expression, joy, and freedom dreaming (Edirmanasinghe et al., 2022; Kelly, 2023; Mayes et al., 2022).

Distinct to this case study, however, the results allude to a connection between the creation of a new environment (the Hip Hop studio) and its support of youth in expressing their genuine thoughts and feelings in ways they could not in other school spaces (i.e., classrooms). This finding supports the fundamental ASE supposition that:

> "The student is fully constituted by the various systems of influence and yet becomes something altogether different as those systems converge into first person experience. As such, it is

> reasonable that any intervention in a school must be germane to the student and the features of the school environment as co-determinants of experience." (Lemberger-Truelove & Bowers, 2023, p. 2)

Additionally, students and staff in the current study described the studio as a physical shift in the school environment, inspiring a new connection between the students and the school. Students reported a shift in their desire to go to school, and even to stay after school, to be in the space they co-created. Teachers described that since the students were spending more time in school, they were able to engage more with them and connect in a meaningful manner demonstrating a reciprocal sense of increased feelings of connectedness between the students and the adults in the school. This identified shift of increased connectedness is of great importance as students' perceptions of the school environment often, directly and indirectly, impact their academic success (Wang & Holcombe, 2010)—and is further evidence of the importance of EducatorCounselors serving youth development through prevention and wellness.

Another key finding from this study is an increased student connection with peers and school adults, as reported by students and teachers alike. Connectedness, a key tenet of ASE, helps foster a sense of acceptance, safety, and encouragement among students and stakeholders in a school environment (Lemberger-Truelove & Bowers Parker, 2023). These findings are similar to those of Lemberger-Truelove et al. (2023), where students and teachers who participated in another ASE inspired intervention reported an increased sense of connectedness and closeness, highlighting the significant benefits of this Hip Hop studio intervention on teacher–student relationships in the school. More positive teacher–student relationships may contribute to a less stressful school environment (Levy & Wong, 2022), which better supports cognitive function and the learning process (Berkovich-Ohana et al., 2019). Relationally, results also showed that students built a sense of community within the studio and beyond. They encouraged each other in the hallways to stay focused on the music they were making and develop new relationships with other students who wanted to be involved. These interactions between peers support the ASE notion of contribution, when students are actively engaging each other to make positive contributions to the school system (Lemberger-Truelove & Bowers Parker, 2023).

Moreover, one of the most notable emerging themes of this study is the increased sense of empowerment that was cultivated within the students. For example, instead of focusing on the limitations of the school environment and what they could not change, the principal described a sense of contribution and empowerment in transforming a space within a school utilizing resources at their disposal, thus creating a more engaging and inclusive school climate where students were supported in stepping outside of their comfort zones. It is crucial that school interventions foster self-empowerment by developing capacities in culturally appropriate ways (Ceballos et al., 2021). For example, in the current study, staff reported students pushed themselves to persevere through previously intimidating academic tasks to utilize the studio. This result reflects research showing that a sense of empowerment in low income and/or resourced schools is helpful in overcoming and better handling challenges (Molina et al., 2023). In all, the results of this study help illustrate how school counselors' can attend to individual youth developement and school systems simultanously through embodying the EducatorCounselor.

Implications for practice and future research

The implications for this study are manifold. First, school counselors are encouraged to use Hip Hop and school counseling interventions to influence student outcomes and school environments simultaneously. While this case study seemingly described a small-group counseling intervention, in the spirit of the EducatorCounselor, Hip Hop school studio interventions stand to create ripple effects that benefit the entire school community beyond simply the youth receiving the direct service. School counselors looking for culturally responsive and theoretically rooted intervention for Black and Brown youth, in particular, might turn to Hip Hop and school counseling as a small-group method but also as an approach to engaging teachers, leadership, and school deans. School counselors should be encouraged to dive into creative and process-oriented groups with youth centered in Hip Hop as a way of inviting Black and Brown youth to drive the direction of their intervention work and organically open pathways for collaboration across school ecosystems. Hip Hop practices offer a practical manifestation of Myers (1992) and Levy & Lemberger-Truelove (2021), who encourage school counselors to take up interventions that are preventative, developmental, wellness, and social justice bound, as opposed to traditional in-office direct counseling services. In this way, school counselors who work with you to construct physical school studios can provide a preventative, developmental counseling service within the school community at large, fostering staff–student relationships, a sense of belonging between peers, and a sense of empowerment among youth to persevere in other classroom spaces.

While not explored directly in this study, the establishment of a school studio space offers opportunities for school counselors to design large-group lessons or parent or community partnership initiatives centered around the studio. It is recommended that school counselors see the establishment of the studio as the starting place for their development, implementation, and evaluation of more comprehensive Hip Hop and school counseling programming (ASCA, 2019). Hip Hop education as a field is vast, with scholars exploring the use of Hip Hop education interventions in English, math, science, and social studies classrooms in school building leadership to primarily support Black and Brown youths' academic development (Allen, 2023). However, significantly less scholarship explores Hip Hop and school counseling interventions, an even smaller portion of which explores how the school counselor can partner with other school building educators

to collectively support youth academic, social/emotional, and post-secondary development. For example, school counselors might choose to engage teachers in the school studio to help them develop rapport with their students. School counselors might run professional development sessions for school staff around the studio to consider more comprehensive implementation for the benefit of individual students and the larger school community. School counselors can collaborate with teachers to consider how to integrate the studio into the classrooms or co-facilitate lessons as part of their unit plans. It is these types of efforts that activate the school counselor as EducatorCounselor and move toward the ASE-aligned goals, impacting student outcomes and affecting school systems simultaneously.

Limitations

Several limitations exist in this case study. First, this study was facilitated by the lead author, who is a counselor educator and played the role of the school counselor for the duration of this intervention. One limitation of this study is the reliance on a researcher with specific expertise in Hip Hop interventions. While their insider perspective brings valuable depth and richness to the study, it also underscores the limited number of school counselors who are currently equipped to implement similar Hip Hop-based interventions. This limitation suggests a need for broader training and preparation in culturally responsive practices within the field of school counseling. In this way, there is a need to consider how to train school counselors to implement Hip Hop interventions to assess replicability. The location of this case study (New York City) was also an ideal environment to study a Hip Hop school studio intervention, calling into question the utility of this work in rural or suburban environments where youth and or school building educators might not identify with Hip Hop culture. A unique aspect of this case study was the support the school counselor, students, and staff received from the school principal. It is important to note that this level of support from administration may be unique to this study, and individuals aiming to replicate this study should anticipate needing to advocate for Hip Hop interventions and perhaps even convince administrators of their value. The exploration of this intervention could have been strengthened by gathering more data to support the case study. The data collected in this case study were qualitative and could have been strengthened by a mixed-methods approach or some quantitative analysis of youth well-being and/or school culture outcomes associated with ASE, such as connectedness, curiosity, or emotional regulation.

CONCLUSION

Findings from this Hip Hop and school counseling intervention case study suggest that the school studio, as a liberatory space, offered a hospitable environment that invited students' authentic identity expression, fostered increased relationships with staff and their peers, and offered students a sense of confidence or personal empowerment. It is our wish that these results encourage school counselors to design, implement, and evaluate Hip Hop and school counseling interventions to support youth outcomes and affect their school systems. Moreover, this study advanced research around culturally responsive school counseling intervention research that is grounded in distinct school counseling theory. This study offers hope for the school counseling field, which faces many challenges, by showing that creative interventions such as Hip Hop, tethered to the beliefs of ASE theory, can help to create hospitable school environments where youth can develop authentically.

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