



Positive Youth Development Through Hip-Hop Music Production

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On the surface, Horizon Youth Service (HYS), located in the greater San Francisco Bay Area, resembled many afterschool programs. On a typical day, participants arrived a little before 4:00 pm, greeted HYS youth workers by first name, and caught up on the day. Then they headed into their program activities, where they pursued their interests, collaborated with others, and developed skills.

What was special about this space, however, was the kind of creative work young people did: professional-level hip-hop music production using high-end equipment in an in-house recording studio. Daily, participants wrote songs, tinkered on the sound board, constructed beats, collaborated on songwriting, led recording sessions, and sequenced songs for album release.

Consider this example from fieldwork I conducted at HYS. Leo, the head youth worker, and

“Bree” (a pseudonym, like all participant names in this article) sat next to each other in front of a large computer screen. Working with a professional music software program, they created beats to put with the lyrics Bree had just written. Leo showed Bree how to use the keyboard, pressing different keys to produce different sounds. After watching Leo intently, Bree strung together her own beats. Leo found her sound unique and her beat timing on point; both of these technological skills take time to develop. When Leo told Bree that she had a knack for beat making, she smiled. Bree was, like other HYS participants, immersing herself in hip-hop production. Working collaboratively with staff and peers, HYS participants learned high-level technological skills, increased their

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capacity for relational connections, and experienced personal growth on many levels.

This paper draws on positive youth development theory to highlight the significance of HYS participants' hip-hop music production, focusing on three HYS organizational features that supported participants' growth. My findings lead to recommendations for out-of-school time (OST) programs that combine creativity with development of life skills.

Hip-Hop and Its Pedagogical Use Across Contexts

Hip-hop, a movement that encompasses art, politics, and culture, emerged in the Bronx, New York, in the 1970s (Love, 2016). Some scholars emphasize that hip-hop emerged as a multicultural and multiracial phenomenon (Chang, 2005; Chang & Watkins, 2007); others argue that it arose most prominently from African-American experiences of oppression and marginalization (Rabaka, 2013; Rose, 1994). Hip-hop has played an important role in community organizing and movements for social justice (Chang, 2005; Chang & Watkins, 2007; Rose, 1994). It resonates with young people across lines of gender, race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status (Alim, 2011) and especially with African-American and Latinx youth because of its critical examination of oppression (Love, 2013, 2014, 2016; Rose, 1994).

In the early 1990s, urban educators started to draw on hip-hop music and culture to facilitate deep learning (Alim, 2011; Hill & Petchauer, 2013; Irby, Hall, & Hill, 2013; Love, 2013). Hip-hop can structure young people's development in a way that is "centered on democratic education aimed at helping students of color multidimensionally conceptualize oppression in an effort to gain political and social equality" (Love, 2013, p. 27). The use of hip-hop in education validates young people's culturally relevant experiences and makes them agents of their own learning, as recommended by thinkers from Freire (1968/2000) onward (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris & Alim, 2014).

Two relevant lines of research have revealed the power of hip-hop in education. The first highlights use of hip-hop in

school English and science curricula. English teachers have drawn on hip-hop lyrics to develop their students' critical lens for analyzing the circumstances of their lives (Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2002; Stovall, 2006). Teacher-researchers, including Emdin (2011), have made science relevant by connecting it with students' hip-hop cultural identities.

The second line of research comes from a burgeoning field of practice that uses hip-hop music production in afterschool spaces to contribute to young people's positive development. Hip-hop-focused OST programs include, among many others:

- The Living Remix Project in New York City (<http://thelivingremix.bandcamp.com>), which provides a pathway for youth to gain skills in digital media, storytelling, and collaboration by writing and producing hip-hop music
- Building Beats, also in New York (<http://buildingbeats.org>), which teaches youth about DJ and digital media production
- Youth on Record in Denver, Colorado (<http://www.youthonrecord.org>), which partners local public schools with the music community to uplift youth voice

Hip-Hop Music Production as Creative Youth Development

Positive youth development theory adds depth to research findings on the use of hip-hop music in school and OST education. Focusing on the healthy development of young people's academic, social, and personal assets and on the essential role of relationships in that development (Benson et al., 2006; Larson, 2000, 2006; Lerner, Brentano, Dowling, & Anderson, 2002), this strength-based approach emphasizes young people's assets and agency (Benson et al., 2006; Damon, 2004). Programs that embrace positive youth development structure opportunities for youth to engage in supportive relationships (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). Research has shown that young people develop through their relationships with others and their participation in their communities (Halpern, 2005; Mitra 2008; Zeldin, Christens, & Powers, 2012).

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Scholars have recently extended positive youth development theory to examine inequities in social relationships and to promote systemic social change (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002; Ginwright & James, 2003). Social justice youth development pushes the focus beyond individual motivation and capacity (Damon, 2004) to examine ways to remove structural and institutional barriers young people face (Cammarota, 2011; Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002; Ginwright & James, 2003). This critical perspective relates to the role hip-hop music production plays in young people's lives and exemplifies the goals of creative youth development (CYD).

CYD, drawing on positive youth development theory, focuses specifically on the developmental outcomes that occur when young people participate in the arts. As young people establish artistic skills in CYD programs, they strengthen their sense of identity and their community connections. The Boston Youth Arts Evaluation Project (2012) found that young people's participation in afterschool arts programs developed their competencies on multiple levels. Intermediate outcomes included participants' ability "to engage and be productive, to navigate, and make connections with others" (p. 29). In the long term, these intermediate outcomes led to the "resiliency, self-efficacy and personal fulfillment, and community engagement that together constitute life success" (p. 29).

Such outcomes develop because CYD afterschool programs exemplify six key characteristics. As outlined by Mass Cultural Council (n.d.), these characteristics are that CYD programs:

1. Provide safe and healthy spaces
2. Emphasize positive relationships
3. Set high expectations
4. Honor young people's voices and expertise
5. Draw on participants' assets
6. Build from young people's broader contexts (Mass Cultural Council, n.d.)

In community-based arts programs, these features give participants robust, sustained opportunities for creativity and increase their opportunities to create more equitable and just futures (Heath & Roach, 1999;

Montgomery, 2017). CYD can expand participants' "self-awareness, social awareness, leadership capacity, and skill for cross-cultural understanding," as Stevenson (2014, p. 22) put it. At HYS, participants' engagement in creative work led, among other positive results, to greater agency in changing their social circumstances.

Research Methods

Program Context

HYS was founded in 1993 by two community members interested in making a difference in the lives of underserved youth in the San Francisco Bay Area. HYS received funding from a variety of donors, government contracts, and private foundations. At the time of data collection in 2013–2014, the organization offered case work support, culinary arts training, life skills workshops, and financial advising to over 150 participating youth.

A subset of participants came to HYS's digital media arts lab to pursue their interest in hip-hop music production alongside more experienced peers and youth workers. The accessibility of the studio enabled these young people to build their skills in digital technology. As they became more expert, HYS hired them to run an in-house record label called Dream Records. They were compensated for facilitating recording sessions and producing their own music, which was distributed both online and on CDs pressed in-house. Dream Records recorded and distributed an album during the year I collected data.

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Participants

At the time of data collection, HYS participants spanned the ages of 14 to 24. Most identified as African American, Latinx, multiracial, or Asian. My study focused on three females and nine males, all between 18 and 22 years old. All were consistent participants, and some were Dream Records employees. They reflected the demographics of HYS: eight were African American, three were Latinx, and one was White. All were advanced participants; the many novice HYS participants were not the focus of this study. Other research informants were six youth workers, including

the cofounders, head caseworkers, and digital media arts lab leaders.

Data Collection

For this qualitative case study, I conducted 28 observations in the recording studio, 12 interviews with youth participants, and interviews with three of the six youth workers. In observations, I focused on social interactions in the recording studio. In interviews, I asked young people about their experiences with producing hip-hop music, their relationships with HYS adults, and their perspectives on the program. I asked the youth workers about their relationships with youth and with HYS, including how long they had worked there and why they stayed.

Anchoring my analysis in the features of positive youth development and creativity at HYS, I used an inductive analytical approach to the data. I focused on HYS's support networks, the quality of youth participation, adult–youth collaboration, peer interactions, and creative processes. I also looked for the ways in which HYS fostered participants' civic and sociopolitical development.

Researcher Positionality

Vu Le (2019), author of the blog *Nonprofit AF*, asks that content creators, including academic researchers, take a deliberate and equity-informed approach in order to avoid reproducing white hetero norms. This concern looms large for me as a white cis-gendered female scholar who conducted research as an outsider to hip-hop culture. Le's REACH equity screen (2019) has helped me to consider how to address representation, experience, accessibility, compensation, and harm reduction in writing this piece. One commitment I made is an intentional choice not to include an examination of HYS participants' songs and lyrics. These young people were not collaborators on this paper, and the songs are their own. Rather than assessing their work, this article lifts up how the organizational structures of HYS enabled them to create their music.

HYS Features That Fueled Positive Development Through Creativity

Programming at HYS was structured to support positive youth development through the creative process of producing hip-hop music. HYS staff worked to provide participants with:

- A welcoming and accessible space
- Agency in the creative process
- Connections to their social and political contexts

A Welcoming and Accessible Space

HYS focused on community and inclusion, giving participants the consistency and support they needed to maximize their artistic process. Its open-door policy welcomed all interested youth, who included first-timers, emerging music-makers, and experienced artists. Young people were drawn to the center because of its focus on hip-hop and the free availability of high-quality studio equipment. Several research participants who had experienced barriers to producing hip-hop music spoke of the accessibility of HYS's equipment. One, noting that he had nowhere else to make music, said that he could not believe that HYS's free studio was a “real studio and not someone's garage or something like that.” Some respondents, motivated by the quality of the equipment, traveled up to an hour by bus each way to get to HYS.

HYS youth workers made themselves available when participants needed them, working most days of the week and sometimes after program hours. Program directors Diane and Jon lived close to the center, so they could be on site within minutes. Diane said in her interview that her job never stopped. Youth respondents said that the commitment and presence of HYS adults made them feel at home. Chris said in an interview that, at HYS, “Anyone's welcome. Everyone is kind of like family. That's what they told me here when I first came: We're a family.” Stephanie, who had been at HYS for seven years, explained that Diane was like a mother to her—more so than her own mother, with whom she did not have a relationship growing up. Marquis said that HYS felt more like home than his own house did. Dominic highlighted the contrast between HYS and institutional and public spaces, including school, where he regularly experienced police discrimination and issues with authority figures. He explained:

There are a lot of places I feel like I am not welcomed, probably because the way I look, or the way I dress, or the way I act. But, over here, I always feel welcomed, and everybody over here always has open arms for me.

These examples highlight participants' perception that HYS was welcoming, inclusive, and accessible.

Participants' relationships with Leo, the head youth worker, exemplified the tone set by HYS. Leo, who was white, worked at HYS in the recording studio and with Dream Records employees because he had an extensive background in writing, producing, and engineering music from a variety of genres. Leo did

not specialize in hip-hop music, and he came from a different background from most HYS participants. Still, he was uniquely situated as a creative ally because of his musical expertise, which he used to scaffold participants' learning experiences. In an interview, Adrian called Leo his mentor and said he appreciated how Leo worked alongside him in the studio. He described, for example, how Leo would dive into the process of making a beat or laying down a track. Other participants also attributed much of their knowledge of music production to their interactions with Leo.

Access to quality equipment at no cost was a big draw. However, the welcoming atmosphere and the commitment and caliber of the youth workers also attracted participants and motivated them to produce music. HYS created a sense of safety and belonging that was often not present in other contexts of participants' lives. The youth workers fostered these characteristics because they knew what it took to support young people and facilitate trust.

Agency in the Creative Process

Collaboration with peers and with adults shaped the creative process of HYS participants across stages of music-making from songwriting, recording tracks, and refining songs to post-production distribution. Participants built their expertise together, not just individually. Michael, who had attended HYS for two years, said in an interview that he and his friends worked hard to collaborate on shared music goals. Similarly, Devin explained that, although the studio space initially attracted him to HYS, he stayed involved because everyone worked together on music projects.

Not only peer interactions in the creative process but also collaborations with youth workers were integral to the structure of HYS programming. For example, one evening Sierra, a Latina newcomer to HYS, and Marcus, an employee of Dream Records—that is, a veteran participant—were working together in the studio on a song Sierra had written. Sierra stood behind the microphone nervously with her hands in her pockets. Marcus stood confidently behind the soundboard as Sierra sang. Saying that she could

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not find her voice in the song, Sierra expressed frustration with how the song sounded. As they continued putting the song to a beat, Marcus noticed that she did not sound as “passionate” in one part of the song as another. He encouraged her, saying, “You gotta feel it!” and urging her to put her authentic self into her vocal production. Sierra responded that it was not her voice she was hearing; instead, she “kept doing high pitch.” He taught her ways to access a lower pitch in her voice, but also

empathized with her feeling that, as he put it, “If it ain't perfect, it ain't right.” Overhearing this collaboration, Leo joined Marcus and Sierra and gave them a different perspective:

You have to slowly kill your inner critic.... Usually when you're making a beat, you don't know where it is going to go, so you just have to make another one and another one.... In the beginning, not judging yourself is actually the key to making a good beat.

This kind of collaboration was a central feature of the creative process at HYS.

Another example of how youth workers encouraged agency was Leo's collaboration with Selena on a song she wrote about her experience of having lost a baby. She said she wrote the song to uplift the experiences of young mothers. Leo emphasized that her song resonated because she drew on her life and used powerful lyrics to communicate her experience. As Leo worked alongside Selena on the song, he positioned her as the expert in her own creative experience.

Connections to Social and Political Contexts

HYS youth workers paid keen attention to equity issues and invited critical conversations about gender, race, socioeconomics, and sexuality. HYS participants experienced many forms of discrimination and oppression across the contexts of their lives. Writing and performing hip-hop music allowed them to process the issues they and their communities faced daily.

These social and political contexts emerged not only in the music, but also in interactions at HYS. Early

in my time there, I witnessed a conversation at a pizza dinner among 10 male employees of Dream Records and two youth workers, Leo and Lisa. The conversation was about how to structure the studio to encourage fuller female participation. CJ said that female presence had increased in his time at HYS but acknowledged that females hesitated to produce their music. Lisa asked if the young men had ideas about how to invite more equity. David thought that female participants could have their own time in the studio without male youth present. Angel agreed, and CJ replied that this was the best idea he had heard. In closing the conversation, Leo asked everyone to be mindful of inclusiveness so that young women could feel comfortable using the equipment. Together, the youth workers and the participants observed that HYS practices fell short of its norms related to gender. In the conversation, the young men took on shared accountability for effecting change, starting with a recognition of their own complicity in the lack of inclusion of females—a lack that has been recognized as a shortcoming of the hip-hop movement.

Other dialogues about participants' social and political contexts occurred through personal narratives they shared while making music. Kel, a 20-year-old African-American participant who had worked for Dream Records for several years, had a passion for running the sound board and writing rap songs. He displayed his commitment to hip-hop culture in his discourse, attitude, and dress. In the recording studio, Kel undertook a critical examination of his circumstances, which included being targeted because of his race. Though he experienced success and acceptance at HYS, Kel had struggled to graduate from high school because of conflicts with authority figures. One day as he worked in the studio, Kel shared with me an incident in which he had argued with a teacher and then been forcefully removed from school by security officers. The teacher and school administrators asked him to apologize, but he did not agree that he had reason to do so. From his viewpoint, the argument rose from his desire “to be heard” because he “felt

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ganged up on.” Kel’s situation was a common manifestation of negative views of Black masculinity. He told this story in the recording studio because this was a space where he felt comfortable. He channeled much of his life experiences into songs he wrote and produced at HYS. In collaboration with peers who had experienced similar situations, Kel wrote hip-hop songs that reflected a deep sociopolitical analysis and commitment to self-determination.

HYS positioned participants to engage as hip-hop artists in work for equity in response to local social and political issues. One song, written by one Latino and two African-American participants, detailed their experience as youth of color in their city. The song, “Unstoppable,” commented on gentrification, the education system, food insecurity, trauma, addiction, violence, and the invisibility of their everyday experience. The chorus goes:

Too many people living in this city.
It’s over capacity, over capacity.
Living in poverty,
Possibly probably gain nothing from it
But invisibility.
And I just wanna make a change.
But I keep screaming.
They seem not to know my name,
So I shout louder.

“Unstoppable” and similar songs in which HYS musicians described the adversity and marginalization they experienced exemplify the connection at HYS between songwriting and political activism. Another example is their performance at a Schools Not Suspensions rally calling for a policy to end suspensions as a punishment for alleged behavioral issues in city schools. The rally addressed the fact that youth of color experienced suspension at higher rates than white youth. The performance of HYS participants at the rally showed the connections among their music, their personal investments, and their community engagement.

Program Recommendations

This study focused on what happens when a youth development program provides an opportunity for participants to dive into an artistic medium they value. Hip-hop has immense capacity to encourage young people's creativity because of its connections to their interests, local contexts, and culture. At HYS, producing hip-hop music helped participants learn technology skills that could transfer to other contexts, even as they developed positive relationships with mentors and peers. HYS's relational and creativity-centered approach gave participants rich opportunities for connection and development. Though few OST programs can afford the professional-quality equipment than often initially attracted participants to HYS, any program can follow the recommendations outlined below to tap the potential of hip-hop as a creative medium for positive youth development.

Responsibly Implement Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Community programs that use hip-hop as a creative outlet run the risk of cultural appropriation. To avoid co-opting a grassroots movement like hip-hop, programs must pay keen attention to whether and how the medium fits the community. One question is how far organizations can go to formalize and institutionalize a creative practice that has its roots in experiences of oppression and marginalization. One possibility is to use hip-hop production in a culturally sustaining way, as HYS did, while also attending to whether the medium fits with the youth community and broader context. HYS participants wrote lyrics and laid down beats to express themselves about issues that affected their lives and communities, developing their skills and expertise in the process.

Following Ladson-Billings's (1995) theory of culturally relevant pedagogy, Paris and Alim (2014) pushed practitioners to consider not only whether pedagogies are relevant, but also whether they support young people's multicultural and multilingual backgrounds. The goal is to sustain young people's "linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling and as a needed response to demographic and social change" (Paris

& Alim, 2014, p. 88). In implementing hip-hop-based creative programming, practitioners can ask whether the practice is connected to the repertoire of practices of local young people (Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003). Culturally relevant practices should produce opportunities for youth to access linguistic skills and exercise creativity. However, programs should take care to avoid dehumanizing ideologies, such as sexism and misogyny, in their use of hip-hop music.

Emphasize Relationships

Relationships with dedicated and committed youth workers and with talented peers at HYS were at least as essential to the development of participants' creative expertise as the center's professional-quality equipment. Research has shown that strong relationships provide young people with safe and empowering settings in which they can build their competencies (Halpern, 2005).

The interaction between Marcus and Sierra during their recording session and the mentorship Leo provided are examples of the ways in which relationships facilitated participants' creative processes. Collaborating with youth workers and peers in the production of hip-hop music enabled participants to process their personal experiences in a safe and inclusive environment. As CYD theorists have noted, authentic relationships provide safe and empowering settings in which young people can exercise their creativity (Stevenson, 2011). HYS youth workers engaged in joint creation alongside youth but also valued participants' expertise and kept the young people's skills and knowledge at the center. Whether or not it has access to high-quality equipment, any creativity-based program can focus on the quality of staff-youth relationships.

Foster Agency and Social and Political Development

At HYS, participants developed and expressed agency through creative expression, media arts innovations, and learning processes facilitated by adults and peers. The participants I observed and interviewed overwhelmingly demonstrated an investment in music production that was self-initiated and self-sustained. Some processes were more collaborative; others, such

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as designing album covers or constructing beats, were sometimes accomplished independently. In all cases, adults were available to facilitate learning as needed.

As they produced hip-hop music and digital media, HYS participants strengthened their individual identities and self-awareness. In the process, they also developed their social and political awareness, accessing their full power to navigate the varied and complex circumstances of their lives. HYS created a space in which participants could discover their agency and engage in personal and social transformation. Montgomery (2018) argues that:

In the most effective CYD programs, young people assume leadership roles and influence programming, administration, and evaluation, and in doing so deepen their sense of responsibility, initiative, ownership, and independence. When young people are able to determine what they want to do in a creative endeavor or community initiative, have the support of their adult mentors to pursue it, and exercise decision-making, they become agents of their own change and lead change in their communities. (Montgomery, 2018, p. 278)

HYS youth not only gained skills in the artistic practice of hip-hop music production, but also had opportunities to exercise leadership and to develop their agency to act on issues in their lives and communities.

HYS is an exemplary OST program focusing on hip-hop music production. The more portraits the field has of such programs, the more we can reflect on the types of learning and growth participants can experience and on the ways in which these programs promote equity and inclusion.

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