

Bronx School Embraces a New Tool in Counseling: Hip-Hop

By [WINNIE HU](#) • JAN. 19, 2016



Elijah Harris, 14, right, from New Visions Charter High School for Advanced Math and Science II, and the rapper Lil Bibby on a morning talk show hosted by Sway Calloway on SiriusXM Radio. Sam Hodgson for The New York Times

Ellis McBeth did not talk to people when he was mad or upset. He picked fights with them, lashing out with his fists to show his feelings.

But when his 12-year-old cousin died four months ago, Ellis found another way to work through his grief: He rapped about it.

Ellis, 14, a ninth grader at New Visions Charter High School for Advanced

Math and Science II in the Bronx, wrote a hip-hop song about his cousin with the help of his school counselor and recorded it with his older sister singing the chorus: “I want to say R.I.P. to you because I don’t believe it’s true, but I’ll still remember you.”

An innovative program at New Visions Charter High School for Advanced Math and Science II in the Bronx uses hip-hop to reach teenagers who may not respond to more traditional counseling.

By WINNIE HU and AINARA TIEFENTHÄLER on January 19, 2016. Photo by Sam Hodgson for The New York Times.

[Watch in Times Video »](#)

“When I leave my feelings inside, the only way you’re going to hear it is if I throw a punch,” he said. “Now I make songs about them. I write verses that cool me down.”

Ellis is part of an innovative school program that seeks to use hip-hop music to reach teenagers who may not respond to more traditional counseling. Called hip-hop therapy, it encourages them to give voice to their day-to-day struggles in neighborhoods where poverty and crime are constants, and provides a foundation for school leaders to engage directly with them in a way that seems more enjoyable than intrusive.

Hip-hop therapy is being used increasingly with teenagers in the Bronx and in other parts of the country as part of an expanding education movement to harness the widespread appeal of hip-hop music and culture to promote academic and social goals.

From hip-hop’s roots in the Bronx in the 1970s, with disconnected youths banging out beats on school lunch tables, it has evolved into a powerful teaching tool that has been used, among other things, to give students a fresh perspective on Shakespeare and algebra and motivate them to exercise and eat better.



Justin Rivera, 16, and Mariahlee Linares, 16, in the Hip-Hop Lyricism course at New Visions Charter High School for Advanced Math and Science II. Sam Hodgson for The New York Times

“Hip-hop education is everywhere,” said Christopher Emdin, an associate professor of science education at Teachers College at Columbia University who moderates a weekly chat group on Twitter called #HipHopEd and, along with the artist GZA from the Wu-Tang Clan, sponsors an annual competition for students to rap about science. “There is no school in an urban area that does not know about hip-hop, or that has not experimented with it.”

Of course, some mental health experts caution that using hip-hop this way would be considered no more than a first step in formal psychotherapy, which emphasizes the importance not only of expressing emotions but also of learning how to deal with them.

Still, many students will rap about deeply personal experiences they might not otherwise share. Jason Alcequiez, 17, a sophomore at the [charter school](#), has rapped about fights with his parents, a best friend who moved away and a girlfriend who broke up with him. “I’m not one of those people who would get sentimental about my feelings and talk about my feelings,” Jason said. “I’d rather write it out in music.”

Afterward, he said, he felt relief: “It was like, you know what, it’s life, so you’ll get over it soon. And I did.”



A student looked over his lyrics in class. Sam Hodgson for The New York Times

While the use of hip-hop as therapy is not new, it has been gaining attention at a time of growing concern that the nation’s mental health systems do not effectively treat many young people, particularly in minority and ethnic

communities. Tomas Alvarez III, a social worker in Oakland, Calif., said he started one of the first programs, called [Beats Rhymes and Life](#), at Berkeley High School in 2004 to address the mental health needs of young black and Latino men, who tended to have higher rates of suspension and expulsion than other students.

“The same young men who refused to meet with me for traditional talk therapy — every single one of them — were writing rhymes at home on their own,” Mr. Alvarez said. “They were already using hip-hop to process their emotions.”

Mr. Alvarez later helped found a nonprofit organization that has run programs at more than two dozen sites in California and New York, including at schools and community centers. “Hip-hop gives young people a platform to talk about their hopes and dreams as well as their grief and loss,” said Mr. Alvarez, who is working to create the Global Institute for Hip-Hop Therapy to develop more financial support for such programs.

In the Bronx, Mott Haven Community High School started an after-school hip-hop therapy program in 2013 that now draws as many as 20 students. J. C. Hall, a social worker who runs the program, called it a “bottom-up” approach to therapy that taps into the interests and skills of teenagers, and works with them to develop coping strategies and other life skills. “It’s like a sugarcoated pill, something to make the medicine go down easier,” Mr. Hall said.



The school's hip-hop therapy program grew out of an after-school club started in 2014 by Ian P. Levy, a school counselor. Sam Hodgson for The New York Times

At the New Visions school, where nearly all of the 550 students are Latino or black, hip-hop therapy has become part of the school culture. Students rap about being stressed about grades, tests and relationships. After a girl in the senior class committed suicide in October, some of her classmates coped by making a hip-hop video tribute that was shown at a school talent show.

Taliesha Thompson, 15, said she now raps whenever she feels pressure building inside her. "It has opened me up more," she said. "I'm very shy and quiet. I keep everything to myself."

The hip-hop program grew out of an after-school club started in 2014 by Ian P. Levy, a school counselor who is developing a model for hip-hop therapy as part of his doctoral research at Teachers College. About 30 students write and

record songs in a corner of Mr. Levy's office, with \$3,000 worth of recording equipment paid for by the school and donations through the crowdfunding site DonorsChoose.org.

In response to police killings of black men that have attracted widespread attention, Mr. Levy's students recorded 20 songs expressing their views on social justice for an album called "[Hoodies Up](#)" on the website SoundCloud. "When traumatic events happen, it's important that students have a space to digest them," Mr. Levy said.



The students had the opportunity to rap live on the Sirius XM radio show "Sway in the Morning." Sam Hodgson for The New York Times

This school year, Mr. Levy also introduced a music class at the school, called Hip-Hop Lyricism, that allows students to earn credit for their work. There

have been other academic benefits as well. One ninth grader who was reading and writing below grade level recently downloaded an app for a thesaurus to expand his vocabulary for songwriting.

Stacey King, the school principal, said hip-hop had helped her connect with students like Ishmel Prince, 15, who used to miss school two to three times a week because he could not get up. She bought him an alarm clock. He still did not show up.

But that changed last month after Mr. Levy and 19 students were invited to rap live on a morning talk show hosted by Sway Calloway on SiriusXM Radio. Ishmel signed a contract with Ms. King, promising to go to school, pass his classes, and get extra tutoring in return for being allowed to go to the show. He kept his word.

“Now when I look at his attendance record and say ‘Ishmel,’ I have a relationship with him,” Ms. King said. “It’s not just like I’m wagging my finger. Each time we do something like this, we get to know students better and better.”