

Engaging Youths through Hip-Hop

Towards a Responsive, Relational, Political Youth Care Practice

Paul Paget

As a child and youth care practitioner and graffiti artist, the author felt both professionally and personally inspired to explore some perceived links between hip-hop and the field of Child and Youth Care (CYC). After providing a brief look at the historical emergence and composition of hip-hop, this article will relate engaging youth through hip-hop to responsive, relational, and political practice concepts in CYC. As the author does this he will intermittently touch upon some personal experiences with hip-hop and discuss the views and work of other professionals who have started integrating hip-hop into their practices with youths.

Keywords

Child and youth care practitioner; CYCP; child and youth care; CYC; hip-hop; culture; responsive; relational; political; ontology

A Brief Overview of Hip-Hop

Though “hip-hop” is a term sometimes used to define the musical form known as “rap”, rap music only represents one element of hip-hop. Other elements

include graffiti art, breaking (break dancing), DJ-ing (disc jockeying, which involves mixing lyrics with a variety of sounds and instrumentals), beatboxing (using one’s mouth to produce sound effects and instrumental

compositions), urban fashion, language (a syntax), attitude (confident and confronting disposition), and street knowledge/worldview (understanding of the streets and things that influence one’s surrounding environment

(Alridge, 2005a; Bridges, 2011; Gonzalez & Hayes 2009; & Tyson, 2003).

Emerging in New York during the 1970s (Brym, 2009), hip-hop was a youth-led movement that grew out of the Civil Rights and Black Nationalist movements, and formed to confront issues of racism and systemic inequality (Bridges, 2011). It was a way of generating a sense of community and a communal voice, but also served as a means of coping with oppression. Quoting hip-hop photographer, Ernie Panicioli, Alridge (2005b) writes

“Pain, oppression, and art, and in this case Hip Hop, not only came out of the Vietnam War, but from the oppression of the streets, the oppression of not being able to get a job, the oppression of not being able to have a stake in your own future. It came from the oppression of not getting a proper education. What happened was that these young kids created their own language of the streets” (p.235).

Taken together, the elements representing hip-hop are more than a series of loose artistic expressions; they form a subculture.

Hip-hop is both an epistemology (knowledge and beliefs) and an ontology (meaning), representing a knowledge base concerning Black American history and the skills of its artistic forms, as well as a way of thinking about and engaging with community. Given the widespread popularity of hip-hop among youths, it is more than surprising that there is little mention of hip-hop in CYC discourses, nor does it appear that many CYC academics have explored hip-hop as a topic of interest or relevance to practice. This article will offer a more in depth look at hip-hop and its immense potential for engaging youths.

Responsive Practice – Cultural and Developmental Competence

The “purposeful use of activity” is a core CYC practice principle (Garfat & Fulcher, 2011) and one that lends itself to being a responsive CYC practitioner (CYCP). VanderVen (2011) argues that culturally responsive activities are powerful, as culture impacts the thinking and behaviour of different groups and sub-groups. However, what constitutes a “culturally responsive activity” should not be limited to notions of ethnicity or race given that youths as a collective represent the subculture of youth culture.

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Core Child and Youth Care Concept: EMERGE by Paul Paget

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It has been evidenced by the works of several scholars that engaging youths through hip-hop based programming can facilitate more culturally competent practices (Forman, 2013; Gonzalez & Hayes, 2009; Travis & Deepak, 2011; Tyson, 2002, 2003), providing youths access to a familiar form of expression to which they relate. DeCarlo & Hockman (2003) argued that, "To a large extent, rap music has been the consciousness raising voice of African American urban youth, addressing developmental issues as complex as identity and sociological concerns of racial inequality" (p.46). They also argue that "...culturally competent social workers must not only understand the contemporary customs of urban adolescents, but their interventions/prevention strategies must be sensitive to and commensurate with the daily life context of these youths" (p.47).

Tyson (2005) posits a similar line of argument, claiming that "...there is no single more important influence on youth culture than hip-hop and rap music, leading some scholars to advocate that in order for helping professionals to move toward 'youth cultural competence' they must become aware of, sensitive to, and

knowledgeable about the hip-hop culture." Moreover, Alridge (2005a) acknowledges the cultural relevance and *transcendence* of hip-hop, relating that it "...has developed as a cultural and artistic phenomenon affecting youth culture around the world. For many youths, hip hop reflects the social, economic, political, and cultural realities and conditions of their lives, speaking to them in a language and manner they understand." (p.190). Although these views about hip-hop are not necessarily relevant to all the youths we may encounter in CYC, hip-hop is one of the fastest growing youth-led subcultures in the world. At the very least, it definitely warrants our curiosity.

Given that CYCPs are life-space practitioners who relate to youths through daily life events, it is likely that many CYCPs encounter elements of hip-hop on a daily basis. In particular, rap music is one element of hip-hop that comes to mind, simply because music is something with which youths (especially adolescents) heavily identify and carry with them across the life-space (Levy, 2012). Generally speaking, music serves as a connecting point, linking youths to their values and beliefs, and one's worldview to the collective

experiences of one's peers within a subcultural/cultural dynamic of relationship and experience (Vaillancourt, 2012). It therefore seems fitting that CYCPs use music as a vehicle to enter the worlds of young people. The use of music to engage young people "... promotes a more 'normal' social environment that is closer to the outside world. By having young people contribute their own music, the environment is immediately owned by them, rather than by the facilitator." (McFerran-Skewes, 2004, p.149-150).

The desire to be culturally and developmentally competent practitioners connotes the desire to be respectful of young people's diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds and their overall capacity for growth. However, enacting culturally and developmentally competent practices entails having a sense of what is relevant and engaging to youths and empowering young people through activities that already exist within youth culture. Purposefully engaging youths through music and other artistic activities, like those constituting the elements of hip-hop, is one possible way of doing this, since activities such as these speak to the various personal, relational, political, and historical dimensions of

young people's ongoing life experiences. Generally speaking, arts programming can help youths evolve their identities and build relationships with others, which includes their relationships with us (Paget, 2014).

Relational Practice – Connecting through “The Cypher”

Big, spray painted letters, intricately stylized in bold vibrant colours emblazon a backdrop where a “cypher” (a circle of artists and spectators gathered to express themselves through the art forms of hip-hop) is forming. “Yo, give me a “beat” (a musical composition) so I can “spit” (rap) somethin’”, says one youth to another youth standing across the “cypher”. The youth whose musical skills have been summoned suddenly begins moving his lips, clicking his tongue, and pushing his breath in and out of his throat in a rhythmic fashion (beatboxing), simulating what sounds like an instrumental piece of music you would hear on the radio. As though timing the movement of a pair of jump-ropes, the youth who is about to “spit” begins bopping his head, feeling out the “soundscape” for a place he can start to “flow” (fluidly rhyme to the beat). However, the tempo of the beat is a bit

slower than what he prefers, so he prompts the youth doing the “beatboxing” to speed it up a bit. As he starts to feel the modified tempo of the beat the other youths sense this and, as if some rhythmic spell has been cast upon the circle, everyone starts bopping their head; the whole group moves in unison. Lyrics begin cascading in torrents of rhythmic word plays, metaphors, and similes. The youth “spitting” finds his stride and, as the other youths pick up the rhythm of his “flow”, they erupt with ad libs and sound effects in the negative space between verses.

A couple of minutes pass by and the circle begins to widen a bit as a “b-boy” (break dancer) finds his way to the centre of the “cypher”. His limbs have clearly caught the fever of the beat as they start to spin him around in circles, propelling him to gyrate in feats of acrobatic

wonder. No longer just a circle of individuals, the “cypher” gives birth to a “click” (group); bonds are forged; memories are cast, and in that moment they all feel connected to something bigger than themselves.

This scenario illustrates hip-hop as a communal dynamic. According to graffiti artist, Christoph Ganter, to fend off boredom and find ways to creatively express themselves, disenfranchised youths would arrange “...parties in the streets and public parks, at which DJs played records and MCs rapped to the beat of the set. The teenagers began break-dancing and writing their pseudonyms with permanent markers and spray cans in public spaces” (2013, p.13).

Rhythm

Henry Maier (1992) proposed that rhythmicity, in the context of CYC practice, is characterized by a sense of



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engagement and awareness of the synchronicity between self and other(s) during moments of dialogue, movement, and other activity. He stated that “joint rhythm offers the most...promise...in activities such as dance, kinesthetic movements and in common musical experience. All of these activities have high promise for blending each other’s rhythms, linking peers with peers, or one generation with another” (p.10).

In the above description of the “cypher” and the explanation of how hip-hop began emerging in the streets, multiple examples of rhythmicity are evident, lending weight to capacity with hip-hop for facilitating rhythmic interaction. Consider the symbiotic nature of the activities already described (rapping, beat-boxing, break-dancing, and graffiti). Although each of these activities is a discipline in its own right, they are enriched when engaged collectively. The skilled rapper can rhyme without a beat, as can the b-boy break-dance without one. However, with the musical accompaniment of a beat-boxer, the rhythm of the rapper’s words is emphasized, and the b-boy’s movements have a structure to unfold within. As for the murals of the graffiti writers, they bring a visual aesthetic that captures the vibrant

atmosphere of hip-hop. These examples of symbiotic activity demonstrate how artists can form connections with each other through different activities. The examples also illustrate potential opportunities for connection and collaboration through activity that is not contingent upon every young person in a group performing the same task. Symbiotic activities offer youths developmental oppor-

CYCP versed in rap or graffiti art mentors a young person in learning one of these art forms. Such a scenario requires finding a rhythm between one’s skills as a CYCP and the young person’s skills as an artist. As the CYCP works at developing a relational connection with this young person, they simultaneously work at increasing that youth’s capacity as an artist.



Core Child and Youth Care Concept: PRAXIS by Paul Paget

tunities to evaluate their skills and interests as they relate to those of others in the pursuit of a mutual goal or project. That said, rhythmic interaction may also take place between just two individuals engaging through the same activity, such as when people collaborate through rap duos, break-dancing crews, and graffiti mural crews. Consider the opportunities when a

Instrumental Relationships

Halpern (2005) describes the “instrumental relationship” as a relationship through which an adult mentors a young person in developing a skill or craft. This is achieved through processes that (a) connect an adult and a young person through a shared interest and set of goals; (b) foster self-

reflection/awareness; (c) nurture a sense of identity as it relates to skill development; (d) de-center authority in favour of collaborative partnership; and (e) focus on both the young person's skill progression and holistic, developmental growth. Notably, these processes reflect a variety of CYC practice principles like 'engagement', 'the purposeful use of activity', 'responsive developmental practice', 'doing things 'with', not 'for' youth', and 'strengths-based intervention' (Garfat & Fulcher, 2011).

Unlike other relationships that seek to engage youths and foster their developmental growth, the instrumental relationship attempts to achieve these things from a place of real connection. Both adult and youth possess a shared interest and therefore an immediate foundation for relationship to unfold is presented. It is not uncommon for CYCPs to encounter youths under circumstances that follow some kind of rupture in their relationships and daily lives (Gharabaghi, 2010), thereby placing them in a position of association with such events. Reflecting on this, it is crucial to be conscious of how we construct our first encounters with youths and enter into relationships with them. If we can begin the journey of relation-

ship by connecting to youths through something engaging and empowering, our attempts to connect with young people will likely be better received. This allows for a rather more indirect focus on past challenges or traumas and when a youth first feels connected and safe, it is easier to start thinking and feeling that 'it may be ok for me to talk with this person about all that's been going on.'

In North America, the power and use of activity are discussed in the discourse of CYC (Garfat & Fulcher, 2011; VanderVen, 2005) yet, empirically speaking, the concept of the instrumental relationship seems to receive less attention. Conversely, in other parts of the world such as Germany and Denmark, CYC discourses and training seem to place greater emphasis on this. According to Cameron (2004), the education of CYCPs (or "social pedagogues") in Germany and Denmark incorporates a vocational training component, which "...usually includes practical subjects such as music, drama, art, woodwork, and working with the natural environment" (p.135). Additionally, "social pedagogues" are explicitly encouraged to integrate professional, personal, and practical dimensions of self in

practice. The professional self is the part of the CYCP that utilizes theoretical concepts and reflective analysis; the personal self is reflected in the use of one's personality, attitude, personal experiences, and capacity for relationship building; and use of the practical self is demonstrated by engaging youths in a variety of different teaching methods and activities (ThemPra Social Pedagogy Community Interest Company, 2014). The instrumental relationship provides space for the personal and practical dimensions of self to synergize. By utilizing one's personal interests and related experiences, CYCPs can facilitate relational connection and developmental growth through activities about which they feel passionate.

As mentioned earlier, the author is both a CYCP and a graffiti artist and can attest firsthand to the power of relating to young people through graffiti art. While working in day treatment service, the author would frequently use graffiti art as a way of initiating and building upon connections with youths. When a new student would arrive at the day treatment setting the author would sometimes scrawl the new student's name in graffiti and bring it to their desk. The



usual reaction to this would be a mixture of surprise, gratitude, and interest. This was a powerful gesture because it conveyed many things. It was a way of connecting, a gift, and a message to the young person that shared something about the author. As a youth would stare at one of these drawings, trying to see where their name appeared in the cryptic lines, it gave the author an opportunity to enter the young person's space and show them how the piece was designed. It also created an opening to discuss their interest in graffiti art and other things that could facilitate a way of connecting.

Sometimes, this would lead to academic breaks where mini-graffiti workshops unfolded, a time when letter ideas were exchanged and other non-graffiti related conversations about life and relationships would transpire. Moreover, the author would begin to incorporate graffiti art into his group work practice when youths showed interest in it, facilitating projects that seemed much more appealing to youths than purely verbal conversations. What the author learned from bringing his personal and practical selves into practice through graffiti was the importance of immediate and ongoing connection

through mutual interest. Good relational practice is about providing youths with new and positive experiences of being in a relationship so that they can bring aspects of these experiences into other relational encounters (Gharabaghi, 2010). Therefore, connecting with youths through shared interests (which is how people build some of their most valued relationships in life) not only fosters our relationships with them, it also fosters young people's greater social development.

Flow

A sense of connectedness and presence go hand in hand. Mark Krueger (2011) once said that "activity is not bound by time, but rather by our enmeshment in it" (p.27). This eloquent statement captures the essence of "flow", a theory describing the contextual dimensions of experiences in which people become mentally and emotionally immersed in what they are doing. A "flow experience" occurs when an individual feels deeply engaged in an activity that is perceived as an end in and of itself, and coupling this is a balanced sense of challenge and necessary skill to overcome the challenges presented by the activity (Shernoff, Csikszentmihalyi,

Schneider & Shernoff, 2003). In relation to the emotional and cognitive impacts associated with flow experiences, Donner & Csikszentmihalyi (1992) state "When people believe they can succeed, the act of struggling in a single-minded fashion to overcome a challenge elicits strong feelings of satisfaction, creativity, clear-mindedness, power, strength, control, concentration, and enjoyment" (p.16). Therefore, a flow experience occurs when one is immersed in something personally interesting while functioning within their "zone of proximal development" (ZPD), a zone in which one's knowledge and skills are being tested slightly beyond one's current level of functioning (Chaklin & Kozulin, 2003). Fulcher (2013) argued that effective CYC practice involves a practitioner's ability to locate a young person's ZPD, as this is the place of functioning where youths grow beyond their current limits. On the other hand, when we fail to recognize a young person's ZPD, we place them at risk of being overwhelmed and thus discouraged and disinterested in pursuing potential growth opportunities.

In addition to individually engaging experiences, relational engagements through



This graffiti collage is a collaborative project that involved Paul Paget and a group of youths with whom he works through his holistic, graffiti-based program, “Graffitiing Youths Voice”. The youths selected “self-image” and “creativity” as the overarching themes of this project and together they expressed this theme through the words “ROYALTY, IMAGINATION, CREATIVE, NOMADIC, UNIQUE, MOXIE, PASSION, BORDERLESS, and EXTRAORDINARY”.

what Csikszentmihalyi (1997) calls “social flow” occurs when two or more people are willing to familiarize themselves with each other’s goal/interests and align them through a shared focus. Refer back to the “cypher” and consider how such a social and cultural site is conducive to individual ZPDs as well as social flow experiences, where artists of different and similar skills come together, engage, and creatively complement each other. When

CYCPs create opportunities for personal and social flow experiences like the “cypher”, they create spaces of belonging that enable instrumental relationships to evolve through rhythmic interaction. Even for young people who have yet to develop the skills to participate with confidence in the “cypher”, this may be a site where youths come to be entertained, inspired, or engaged through a sideline art lesson with a caring adult or peer mentor. Overall, it can

serve as a hub that welcomes, intrigues, and empowers youths, while providing them with a sense of connection and belonging.

Political Practice

Pre-Intervention: Critically Reflecting about Rap Music

Before adults can genuinely embrace hip-hop as a vehicle for relating to young people, they must be willing to engage in critical reflection about their own views, beliefs, and connection to what hip-hop is all about. This is especially true of rap music, the most accessed element of hip-hop among youths. During the course of practice experience, this author has noticed that relating to youths through dialogue about rap music has been frequently stifled by the poorly crafted arguments and impulsive objections of other colleagues. Many professionals are inclined to denounce rap music because of its use of profanity and controversial content. Additionally, some avoid engaging youths through rap music for fear that they will interpret it as an endorsement of anti-social behaviour. More often than not, rap music is deemed “inappropriate” and quickly cast aside. Sadly though, this moralistic view undermines the potential that rap music offers as a vehicle for making

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meaning with young people about their lives.

In "Beyond good and evil: Towards an a-moral youth care practice", Skott-Myhre (2006) discusses the ramifications of moralizing language and behaviour. When people rely on pre-established codes of conduct to determine what is and is not "appropriate" language and behaviour, they simply regulate the permissibility of certain language and behaviour without properly examining its context. Consequently, a moralistic approach can limit young people's capacity for expressing themselves (Skott-Myhre, 2006), while also limiting our *contextual understanding* of their language and behaviour. Taylor & Taylor (2007) exemplify how moralizing can lead to ethical oversights by referencing public and media reactions to the song *Fuck the Police*, by the rap group N.W.A.. Many people had immediate moral objections to the song when it was released but, according to Taylor & Taylor (2007), most opinions about the song lacked critical insight into the socio-political conditions that inspired it. *Fuck the Police* was intended to express frustration and stir public awareness about police brutality against Black males in certain racialized communi-

ties in the United States. However, people were so fixated on the profane, anti-authoritarian sentiment of the song that they overlooked the greater ethical issue of police violating people's human rights. This example demonstrates how mere reliance on codes of conduct can skew or limit the purview of what is or is not ethical. In practice, substituting codes of conduct for ongoing, critical reflection, lends itself to the objectification of youth. Since a moralistic approach fails to ask young people about the meaning they attribute to their own conduct, or consider the relational and environmental influences that help shape their conduct, it limits our understanding of youths and silences their stories.

Professionals who dismiss using rap music to engage youths about their worldview may believe they are upholding some sort of standard for the benefit of young people's moral development. However, like other aspects of popular culture music, rap reflects the culture that encompasses it. Therefore, denouncing discussion of rap because it is violent, misogynistic, profane, anti-authoritarian, and materialistic fails to acknowledge our co-construction of certain

social realities. Despite its raw and sometimes ugly delivery, rap engages with its subject matter in a way that is more honest than the approaches often taken by adults (Taylor & Taylor, 2007). Perhaps adults may want to heed the messages of rap music as a clarion call to reflect upon their own values, what they represent, and what they are truly passing on to our youths. The aspiration to engage youths through dialogue about rap music demands an ecological mindset. Many of the messages expressed through rap music speak to different relational, political, and economic issues embedded in our culture. CYCPs must be careful not to treat the content of rap music as something that is only relevant to youths and/or certain ethnic/racial groups. Instead, it must be treated as both a relational and *political* pursuit.

Because relational practice is not merely a matter of relating with individuals in our communities and/or workplaces, but is also a process that takes place within and among social conditions, there is a political dimension to relational practice. Relational practice can also (not instead) be understood as a process

through which we relate with these conditions in the pursuit of more just and equitable social conditions (Newbury, 2012 p.14).

Conversing with youths about rap music thus represents a means of cultivating a critical awareness about social conditions in our overarching culture – a broader awareness that is co-constructed through engaging youths in an ethically sound political endeavour.

Deconstructing Rap and Meaning-Making with Youths

To genuinely engage youths through hip-hop, some familiarity with and respect for hip-hop is a pre-requisite. “Hip-hop is a complex and potentially dangerous arena for the novice; for those with preconceived notions and fixed opinions, it is a world in which they will quickly find themselves ostracized and excluded” (Taylor & Taylor, 2007, p.213). In this case, having a prior knowledge about hip-hop, its historical trajectory, and how it has evolved, is helpful. For instance, it is important to possess a prior knowledge about the different subcategories of rap music. As an advocate of using rap music to help youths reflect upon

and connect with their lived experiences, Tyson (2003) provides a breakdown of some of rap’s different sub-categories. Here are four of particular note:

- (1) *Reality Rap – ghetto storytelling, chronicles life in certain communities, such as drug use, joblessness, poverty, violence & sex;*
- (2) *Political/ Conscious/ Progressive/Radical Rap – critiques individual and systematic racism, oppression and exploitation with the intent of creating awareness and individual social action;*
- (3) *Gangsta/Hardcore Rap – very similar to reality rap, but because of its perceived abuse of vulgar expletives it is infamous for being senselessly violent and grossly misogynistic;*
- (4) *Commercial Rap – perceived as being produced so that it is more acceptable in the mainstream music industry (and is often an unfair and simplistic characterization) (p.5).*

These sub-categories provide a helpful tool for deconstructing the content of rap (also see Tyson, 2005, “The Rap Attitude and Perception (RAP) Scale: Scale

Development and Preliminary Analysis of Psychometric Properties”), although a caveat to using such a tool is to remember that the content of rap songs does not always neatly fit into one of these prescribed sub-categories; some songs might obtain attributes of two or more sub-categories. Furthermore, rap music is ever-evolving, so keeping up to date with newly emerging subcategories is necessary to be a relevant practitioner on this front.

Tyson (2002; 2003) promotes the use of politically conscious rap to engage youths in critically reflective discussions, although CYCPs may want to consider gradually exposing young people to more political rap music if it is not something they usually listen to. This way the practitioner gains a more accurate account of a young person’s or group of young people’s relationship to rap music and how it reflects and influences their world view. Drawing on the work of Elligan, Gonzalez & Hayes (2009) affirm this idea and articulate the five stages of Elligan’s “Rap Therapy” model:

1. Assessment – asking youths about which particular songs, artists, and rap genres they listen to;
2. Alliance – listening to rap

“Hip-hop is a complex and potentially dangerous arena for the novice ...”



- music *with* youths and suspending judgement to ask questions and elicit the meanings that youths attribute to the music being played;
3. Reframing – a continuation of the assessment and alliance stages, while also exposing youths to other forms of rap and inquiring about their perceptions of it (this is when more political content might be introduced);
 4. Role Play/Reinforcement – engaging youths through lyric writing exercises, sharing with each other what each has written, and exploring themes and meanings in lyrical content (practitioners encourage youths to explore and write about themes and ideas that they are less familiar with); and
 5. Action/Maintenance – asking youths to write about issues that have impact on their lives and different ways of seeing and dealing with these issues.

Using Elligan’s framework for connecting with youths helps to inform meaning-making processes that facilitate a creative, emergent style of practice. As a CYCP and a youth connect through

musical interests and lyric-writing exercises that illuminate aspects of each other’s worldview, opportunities for co-creating new meanings and approaches to personal and societal conditions emerge. It is both a critically reflective as well as an action-oriented process, a creative form of engaging in political praxis (see Freire, 2009) with youths.

cultural and spiritual connectedness; resisting and critiquing peoples, spaces, and systems that promote fragmentation and divisiveness; and fighting (literally) for a peaceful, restorative, and humanizing existence – a movement toward self-actualization (p.327).



Core Child and Youth Care Concept: RELATIONAL by Paul Paget

Hip-Hop as Political Ontology

In “Towards a pedagogy of hip-hop in urban education”, Bridges (2011) defines hip-hop as

... a critical cultural movement due to its historic and continued orientations toward healing broken families and supporting

Interestingly, this statement parallels many empowerment based CYC practices (Roholt, Hildreth & Baizerman, 2007), providing an ontological basis for youth care practitioners to conceive and enact hip-hop as a form of political practice. Bridges (2011) also shows how the political spirit of hip-hop was integrated with his role as an

inner-city teacher, articulating three distinct principles which include: (1) call to service; (2) commitment to self-awareness; and (3) resistance to social injustice.

Beyond the institutional expectations of teaching (i.e. how to structure lessons, evaluate progress, etc.) “call to service” entails the spirit of teaching, signified by a teacher’s desire to spiritually and culturally connect with students and the encompassing community. It also involves practicing love for and protection of one’s community by promoting critical awareness of self and oppressive social institutions and structures that limit the capacity and social mobility of people and communities. From a CYC perspective, “call to service” reflects ideas similar to Smith’s (2006) ponderings about “caring *for*” and “caring *about*” people. Youth care practitioners care *for* the needs of youths and communities, but in addition to our basic service provisions, there is an element of genuine caring for the *well-being* of people with whom we work and spend time.

A “commitment to self-awareness” includes more than knowing one’s own background, experiences, and pedagogy. It means locating these ele-

ments of self in relation to one’s students and community, and one’s beliefs about and hopes for humanity. It also means maintaining a conscious awareness of the continuity between one’s teachings and how one presents, and being cognizant of the motives and beliefs that drive one to be an educator. Similarly, CYC promotes reflecting about and utilizing self in practice, as self is the permeable instrument through which CYCPs connect with, affect, and empower others (Gharabaghi, 2010).

Finally, the principle of “resistance to social injustice” is about educating youths in ways that acknowledge and critique systemic inequalities that engender the oppression of groups, which includes but is not limited to inequalities perpetuated by the educational system. Bridges (2011) argues that “resistance to social injustice” is informed by Freirean principles about engaging others through “critical dialogue”, an influential principle also underpinning the philosophical base of contemporary CYC (Smith, 2002). Through dialogue stimulated by inquiry-based questions, CYCPs foster critical consciousness among youths and communities. Freire called this “*conscientizaco*”, which

“... refers to learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality” (2009, p. 35). All in all, Bridges’ (2011) notion of a hip-hop pedagogy is congruent with how many CYCPs enter into their practice. They come to it as a calling and bring with them a critical sense of self to help build stronger individuals and more equitable communities.

Reclaiming Hip-Hop and Child and Youth Care with Youths

For youths who have more or less come to know hip-hop through modern, mainstream rap music, chances are they have not experienced hip-hop as a sense of community or way of *engaging* community. This is not to say that the (namely rap music’s) sociopolitical side of hip-hop no longer exists. However, starting sometime in the 1990s, the music industry’s increasing favouritism and exploitation of the “gangsta” and commercial rap genres has constricted the political voice of rap, reducing current, mainstream rap to little more than lyrical brand dropping (Brym, 2009). Forman (2013) calls this the “Hip-Hop Industrial Complex”. Typically speaking, “The Hip-Hop



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Industrial Complex” takes the form of the commercial rap genre, a branch of rap music that is well-known for promoting messages of materialism and one-upmanship, not to mention messages depicting “stereotypical racial and sexual identities, tacit acceptance of misogyny and male sexism, and the representation (lyrical or otherwise) of masculine aggression and violence” (Forman, 2013, p.253). As a fan of rap music, the author can unfortunately say that this type of rap is perpetuating a lyrical discourse that fuels hostile competition and disrespect between artists. Many successful commercial artists centre their lyrical content on themes of material consumption and hegemony over other artists, reinforcing the general mindset that elevating one’s self *above* (not integrating one’s self *within*) the rap community is more desirable. Ensnared by the music industry’s agenda to appropriate rap music for capital, the momentum of rap as a political movement becomes compromised. As rappers vie for acceptance into the mainstream, camaraderie between artists diminishes, causing the rap community to turn against itself.

Likewise, Skott-Myhre (2005) indicates how the

political momentum of CYC is obstructed by capitalism in its own way. In the same way that “making it” in the rap industry is contingent on promoting music containing messages that diminish community, youth serving agencies’ access to funding provisions in CYC is often contingent upon using evidence-based practices that contradict relational and community building approaches. The result of this is CYCPs working in ways that reflect the demands of funding bodies, ways that promote doing things “to” or “for” youths, but not necessarily “with” them. In other words, opposite to forming alliances with youths, CYCPs are encouraged to work with young people in ways that polarize them as ‘helpers’ and ‘the helped’. Instead of working *with* youths to *change* our care system, we are expected to conduct social engineering practices that force youths to *adapt* to the system already in place (Skott-Myhre & Skott-Myhre, 2010).

To further illustrate this point, Fulcher & Ainsworth’s (2005) article, “Group Care Practice with Children Revisited”, highlights the primary orientation of different branches of the social services sector: The health care branch seeks to *treat* youths; social welfare *nurtures* young

people; in the educational branch, youths are *taught*; and in criminal justice young people are *controlled*. Even though the intended focus with each branch guides different interventions with youths, one can see how each intervention system operates with an implied giver-receiver or helper-helped dynamic. Furthermore, these discrete orientations to caring for youths through different branches of social services highlights a divided approach to fostering young people’s development as whole persons.

CYCPs and other professionals caring for youths across varying sites of practice could glean insights from the nature of the “cypher” as a metaphor for conceptualizing care services. The “cypher” is a hub of interaction where artists can connect through art forms that vary. Nonetheless, all the artists complement each other through dynamic imaginative expression and the creation of a unified atmosphere. Differing practice sites – whether health, welfare, education, or justice – would likely be more successful in fostering the development of whole persons if they adopted aspects of each other’s approaches, worked with each other more

closely, shared ideas and resources, and engaged youths as co-creators of the environments they work within. To do this, however, we must collectively transcend the view that we engage care in separation from (and sometimes in competition with) each other and the youths in our care and be aware of our limited perceptions about what care can look like across different practice sites, the creative power of youth-adult relationships, and the influence that funding structures have in creating settings that separate us and prevent us from being more dynamically effective.

Skott-Myhre & Skott-Myhre (2007) state that "... in order to stay in control, capitalism must separate people from their work and each other...and that...we must be separated from each other so we cannot organize on our own behalf" (p.50). Therefore, they promote a politicized approach called "love as unbounded community" which suggests that CYCPs engage youths and other community members as partners for systemic change. Success on this front hinges on practitioners' willingness to re-examine their roles, and an openness to negotiating with youths and communities about our

services and how they are delivered through the spaces where we come to be together. Essentially, we must develop community both *with* and *within* community.

Congruent with this notion of "love as unbounded community", Forman (2013) advocates for a hip-hop oriented approach to connecting and developing communities, coining this work "Hood Work" – defined as "...mobilized activism and community organizing...which involves educational and pro-social messaging for youths that are enacted *within* and *through* hip-hop" (emphasis added, p.245). For example, Forman (2013) talks about organizing hip-hop shows in community spaces that bring all the elements of hip-hop together, providing youths and other community members a site to connect, have fun, and (through artistic expression) bring awareness to issues that affect individuals and the community as a whole. Also, the aggregate representing those who enact "Hood Work" ("Hood Workers"), draws "...together private and corporate philanthropic foundations, civic leaders, trained or untrained social workers, students, parents, and urban youths" (Forman, 2013 p.248).

Engaging practice through

sites and relational assemblages like those promoted by "Hood Work" and "love as unbounded community" offer CYCPs opportunities to connect with youths and communities in ways that disrupt the borders of closed agency spaces and formal practitioner-community relations. CYCPs begin to liberate themselves and others, as with the "cypher" in hip-hop, empowering communities away from dependency on our services to becoming more integrated, interdependent and connected people because we literally engage their communities and their needs and interests alongside them (Gharabaghi, 2009).

Concluding Thoughts

Though aspects of hip-hop appear in the everyday work settings of CYCPs, hip-hop has received little attention in the North American CYC discourse. One of the intentions of writing this article was to spark dialogue about hip-hop in this field, while also challenging the way that agencies conceive, design, and implement youth programming. For those CYCPs who are restricted by agency policies and directors who deem hip-hop based programming "inappropriate", the author hopes this article can be of service to your



plight. Hip-hop can serve as a conduit for a responsive, relational, and political CYC practice. To truly engage young people, CYCPs must open themselves to the interests of youths, include aspects of youth culture in programming, and seek opportunities to bring their professional and personal selves into practice. CYC is not just about building capacity; it involves bridging capacity through the already existent strengths and interests of youths, communities, and self. Finally, hip-hop based programming can enable CYCPs to become more nomadic and, like the “cypher”, turn practice into a de-centered site where various people can assemble, engage, and co-create something new.

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