

# “It’s good to know something real and all that”: Exploring the benefits of a school-based Hip Hop program

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## Abstract

This article reports on the student benefits of a school-based Hip Hop and beat making program. While a significant amount of literature has reported the benefits of Hip Hop programs in North American schools, comparatively little is known about the benefits of such programs in the Australian context. Using an ethnographic approach, this study explored a two-day intensive Hip Hop music program delivered to nine secondary students in a Melbourne school. The study took an intentionally open and emergent approach in order to avoid preconceptions of potential benefits, and allow any unexpected benefits to emerge. Analysis also explored the elements of the program that appeared key to fostering identified benefits. While time limitations were seen to limit the potential of the program, results identified a number of student benefits, including school engagement, social connection, and personal development. Factors that were seen as key to these benefits included the presentation of facilitators, the ability for the program to link to students’ musical preferences, the equipment and space, as well as the focus on Hip Hop culture itself. While more research is necessary to further explore these findings, they provide important evidence for the potential role that Hip Hop and beat making programs can play in Australian schools.

**Keywords:** Hip Hop, Hip Hop Education, Hip Hop music, Beat Making, Student benefits

## Introduction

Hip Hop is a culture that emerged among marginalised Black and Latino communities in the South Bronx during the 1970s, as a way to promote notions of identity, community, resilience, and resistance to oppression (Chang, 2007; Rose, 1994). Drawing on existing art forms from Latin and African Diaspora cultures, Hip Hop grew around four major artistic forms; “known as the four elements, [these] include emceeing (i.e. rapping), DJing (i.e. turntablism), forms of dance such as breaking (i.e. breakdancing), and writing graffiti” (Petchauer, 2009, p. 946). Through these four elements, Hip Hop culture has continued to convey messages of community, peace and social consciousness, while also allowing individuals

to construct and express their own identities in positive ways (Travis, 2015).

Yet, alongside these positive aspects, a largely commercialised image of Hip Hop culture has grown in parallel, which is often associated with gangsters, thugs, pimps, misogyny, drugs and violence (Kubrin, 2005). This image, which continues to be perpetuated through mainstream media, has led numerous scholars to search for negative relationships between young people and Hip Hop (Miranda & Gaudreau, 2011), and caused anxiety about the presence of Hip Hop in schools, and young people’s lives more generally (Kandakai, Price, Telljohann, & Wilson, 1999). Other scholars like Tricia Rose (1994, 2008) and Halifu Osumare (2007) have, however, drawn a more nuanced portrayal of the contradictions of Hip Hop culture as part of

Western consumer cultures and capitalism.

Despite outspoken public condemnation of Hip Hop as a negative influence on society (for discussion, see Croke & Travis, 2017), recent years has seen a rapid growth in literature re-affirming the positive role that Hip Hop culture can play in the lives of young people (Alvarez, 2012). Much of this has emerged from research in health and social science disciplines, including social work (Travis, 2015), psychiatry (Sule & Inkster, 2015), psychology (Winfrey, 2010) and music therapy (Hadley & Yancy, 2012). Scholars in all of these fields report solid evidence for how the application of Hip Hop in therapeutic and community settings can have profoundly positive benefits of young people in areas including identity, self-expression, and positive connections to community. Many such programs can now be found around the world, particularly in Europe and North America.

The area in which contemporary Hip Hop scholarship has proliferated the most is education. Petchauer (2009) explains how this has occurred across many aspects of education, from taking a central role in primary and secondary curriculums, to full tertiary education courses. For Petchauer, this is linked to the ability for Hip Hop culture to inform critical pedagogy, inform and empower marginalised groups, and teach academic skills. He further argues for the distinct role of music: "The creative practices of hip-hop and the messages constructed in the music are woven into the processes of identity formation by which youth and young adults conceive of themselves, others, and the world around them" (p. 947).

For scholars such as Ladson-Billings (2015), providing students access to Hip Hop culture through music education is not only a valuable tool for social justice, but also critical for the identity development of marginalised youth. Other such as Emdin (2008) see Hip Hop as a valuable engagement tool, particularly when viewed in the context of contemporary youth culture. Through the lens of culturally responsive education (Lai, 2012), scholars have shown how the use of rapping

can help engage students from across different cultural backgrounds in learning areas such as science (Emdin, 2008), and philosophy (Sciullo, 2014). Such is the recognised potential in education settings, several scholars have proposed (and in some cases) implemented entire approaches to schooling through the lens of Hip Hop culture (Seidel, 2011).

While the amount of both research and education programs which explore the benefits of Hip Hop in students' lives continues to expand exponentially, literature and discourse remains firmly rooted in the North American context (Petchauer, 2009). This may at first seem logical, given it is also the birthplace of the culture, but it does not reflect the fact Hip Hop culture has long spread throughout the globe (Mitchell, 2000, 2002; Travis, 2013).

Australia has an established Hip Hop scene, with scholars charting the history of local Hip Hop communities back to early 1980s (Maxwell, 2003). Yet, with the exception of a notable body of literature exploring connections between Hip Hop and Australian Indigenous communities (Hutchings & Croke, 2017; Minestrelli, 2016; Mitchell, 2006a, 2006b), literature exploring the role of Hip Hop in Australian society is largely lacking. This gap becomes even larger when looking at the role of Hip Hop in Australian schools. Further, the small amount of literature in this specific area has focused on the use of Hip Hop programs for specific health promotion activities (McEwan, Crouch, Robertson, & Fagan, 2013). This means little is known about the potential benefits of Hip Hop delivered in mainstream settings, including music education.

This study aims to contribute to filling this gap in knowledge by exploring a Hip Hop-based music education program delivered in a mainstream Australian school. By identifying the potential ways in which Hip Hop programs can benefit Australian students, results are well-placed to inform both international and local academic discourse, as well as the implementation of future school-based programs in Australia.

## Methods

### Aims and research questions

This project aimed to explore the potential student benefits of participating in a Hip Hop and beat making program that was delivered in school by Hip Hop facilitators and a registered music therapist. This was guided by the primary research question: "Does a school-based Hip Hop program have any identifiable benefits for students?" The exploratory nature of this question aimed to avoid the pre-assumption that benefits would be experienced, and preconceptions of what these might be.

The study also explored how particular program elements were connected to student experiences to help understand potential benefits in the context of the program. This sought to identify benefits and challenges of school-based Hip Hop programs, thus informing future programs and research.

### The program

The program investigated was delivered by a Melbourne-based non-profit organisation established to deliver music programs in schools. While this external provider operates under the broader banner of music provision, the organisation specialises in the use of digital beat making technologies. Facilitators also have long histories as Hip Hop artists and are active in local and international Hip Hop communities which means their programs often focus on Hip Hop.

The program took place in a Prep (four to five years old) to Year 9 (14 to 15 years old) school located in Melbourne's West, and was delivered over two full school days (9am to 3:30pm), in the second last week of the Australian school year. It sought to teach students the basics of Hip Hop beat making using laptops and Ableton Push MIDI-controllers provided by the organisation. This included teaching students about beat and song structure, step sequencing, sampling, as well as recording drums, bass, and melodies using MIDI drum pads

and arpeggiators. Using a sequential workshop format, students were supported in using these skills to make their own original beats and remixes. Each student did this from their own workstation (laptop computer connected to Push controller and headphones). Students were given the opportunity to present or "show-back" their beats to the group at the end of each day, and select one to be "mixed down" by the Hip Hop Facilitators, and provided to the students on a USB stick. Students were also invited to take part in a rapping workshop which ran alongside the beat making on the first day, with the two participating students invited to perform their raps to the group.

Initially, the study sought to investigate a 10-week program co-designed and co-facilitated by Hip Hop Facilitators (HHF) and a Registered Music Therapist (RMT). However, school recruitment and funding rules created time limitations which prevented this. Instead, it was decided to investigate the benefits of the HHF's established model (described above). Consistent with research ethics commitments, an RMT was present during workshops to support student wellbeing if necessary, and integrate music therapy practice where possible. Timing limitations also meant a 10-week program was unfeasible, thus the two full-day structure was used to satisfy school and funding needs. These limitations are discussed later in this paper.

This study and program were funded by the Faculty Small Grant Scheme at the Faculty of Fine Arts and Music, and the University of Melbourne. The study was also approved by the University of Melbourne Human Research Ethics Committee (ID# 1647799.1).

### The participants

Nine students participated in this program. Four identified as female, and five as male. Participants identified with several cultural backgrounds, and were from Years 7, 8, and 9. See Table 1 for further participant details, including self-selected pseudonyms to be used in publications.

**Table 1: Student participant details.**

Chosen Pseudonym	Year Level	Self-Described Cultural Background
Travis Scott (Karim)	Year 9	Ethiopian (Muslim “but I don’t go to church”)
Shaniqua	Year 7	Half Lebanese, Half Iranian (Muslim)
Geoffrey	Year 8	Australian, with some New Zealand background (White)
ASAP Ferg	Year 8	From New Zealand (Maori)
Felicia	Year 7	Lebanese (Muslim “and proud”)
Shiny	Year 7	Ethiopian (born there)
Maharek	Year 7	Lebanese (Muslim “and proud”)
Kiren	Year 8	Parents from Vietnam (born in Australia)
Martha	Year 7	Islander

Participants were referred to the program by school leadership and wellbeing staff. A year level coordinator explained they were the most disengaged students in the school, for reasons including: social withdrawal; low intelligence; oppositional behaviour; inappropriate conduct towards people in positions of authority; and disengagement from school due to “cultural and family factors”. Staff noted differences in faith posed a potential source of conflict within the group. Along with supporting these students’ needs, participant allocation to the program was also linked to reducing disruption in regular classes during the final weeks of the school year.

Both Hip Hop Facilitators (HHFs) had been involved in Hip Hop culture for about 20 years, each with a long history of working as DJs and producers, and as active members of local and international Hip Hop communities. The pair set up the non-profit organisation, which they had been running for approximately two years. Matt, the RMT, was a recent graduate who received his registration to practice less than 12 months prior to the project, and expressed a personal and professional interest in Hip Hop.

## Data collection

Data collection followed an ethnographic approach, combining participant observation and focus groups. Observational data was collected by the first author during program sessions via note taking to record key events, interactions, and personal reflections. Reeves, Kuper, and Hodges (2008) argue, “Participant observation enables ethnographers to ‘immerse’ themselves in a setting, thereby generating a rich understanding of social action and its subtleties in different contexts” (p. 514). This process was considered participant observation given first author helped with session coordination, setting-up gear, assisting students, and leading some warm-up activities. As Gobo (2008) argues, this enables researchers to “establish direct relationships with social actors [and learn] their code (or at least parts of it) in order to understand the meaning of their actions” (p. 5).

Following a similar process described by Reeves et al. (2008), focus groups were conducted after the program to further explore themes that arose through observation. The first involved both HHFs and the RMT, lasted about one hour, and was conducted by the first and second authors (who joined via Skype). The student focus group was conducted by the first author at the school, and lasted about 50 minutes. Focus groups were recorded using a voice recorder, and transcribed for analysis.

## Data analysis

Consistent with an ethnographic approach, data analysis followed an emergent and iterative process (Reeves et al., 2008). Both authors discussed observational notes during debriefs over Skype after each session, collaboratively identifying themes that arose throughout the program, which were used to inform focus groups.

After all data were collected, a second iteration was conducted where key moments and interactions were coded within both observation notes and focus group transcripts. This represented a combined inductive and deductive thematic analysis; themes identified in the first iteration were further explored, and new themes were allowed to emerge that supported or challenged existing themes. Codes were then organised into the loose categories of *Program Benefits* and *Factors that impacted outcomes* to address the research question. A third category was created for codes concerning *Program Challenges*. Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2008) argue this combined approach provides structure for addressing pre-determined research questions, while simultaneously allowing unexpected themes to emerge.

A final iteration explored relationships between codes within and between categories. This enabled authors to propose explanations for when and how this program was able to afford benefits to participants.

## Results

While the length of the program appeared to limit potential outcomes (see *Challenges* section for further discussion), several benefits did emerge across both observation and focus groups data. These are presented here to indicate the areas in which this program showed the most potential, along with the program factors that emerged as most salient for supporting these.

## Program benefits

### Engagement

The concept of engagement was ever-present throughout the program. This began with the initial briefing from school staff that each student in the group was referred to the program due to engagement problems. Yet, while the issues mentioned by staff were somewhat discernible during the program, student engagement was considered a program strength:

**Christos:** Yeah, look, if they are the worst kids then they are doing all right.

**Davey:** To me they were model students. I didn't see them as too drastic or anything. You know, they paid attention when we asked them to pay attention. Occasionally they lost it but that's natural for young people [...] I thought they were great.

Matt the RMT supported this, noting that despite the length of sessions, the students' ability to remain engaged was significant: "The day was long; however, their attention and focus was actually amazing, I really think that they were super, super engaged with the tasks". This was strongly supported in the observation notes, which consistently identified students' commitment to the program activities even after long periods of time without a break.

### Respectful behaviour

Extending on the more general notion of engagement, students also generally presented as attentive and respectful towards the facilitators, the program, the school, and each other. One example included students' approach to finding a breakout space for the rapping workshop:

We talked collaboratively about where we could do it, and I asked the students, "If we go and do it out there [in the corridor], will it be ok?" Some responded, "Yeah, it should be ok, as long as we are not disrupting anyone" which I noted as interestingly respectful and insightful given these were meant to be disruptive, disengaged students. ASAP Ferg and Shiny led the way to inspect the space, and decided instead on a room that would not be used for the rest of the day, to

keep disruption to other staff and students to a minimum.

In this case and others, students adopted leadership roles, carefully considering their impact on the rest of the school. Students also helped facilitators set up and pack down equipment, and volunteered to help take things to and from the HHFs car.

### Attendance

With the exception of one student who did not attend the program at all (and who staff reported was completely absent during the weeks surrounding the program), staff concerns around attendance did not eventuate. Students came back after each break early, with some students asking if they could stay during breaks to continue work on their beats. On day two, all students were at the room 30 minutes before the class started. The only student who returned late from a break was Kiren, who apologised sincerely, saying a teacher made him “stay to pick up rubbish for no reason” – which the other students supported, telling us that he was regularly singled out by teachers in this way.

The RMT shared his thoughts on how this connected to the program:

**Matt:** I had a few of the young people saying to me, “I did not want to get out of bed [...] and now I’m really happy to be here” [so] the overall response from them was that they were feeling really happy to be at school, they were all loving it, most of them were saying that they didn’t want to go to school but that once they were there and doing the program they were loving it, they were really happy.

This sentiment was reinforced by the students:

**Interviewer:** If we were to do another program like this would you all do it?

**All:** (yelling) Hell yeah.

**Karim:** For me it makes me happy for real. Like you know, it’s good to know something real and all that shit.

### Social connection and support

Data that at first appeared to challenge the above benefits were observations that students

often appeared distracted from activities; sharing headphones, or leaving their workstations to move around the room and speak to others. Yet, as the program progressed, it became clear that these were important opportunities for building social connection.

Early on day one, this started quite discretely: Shaniqua has just surreptitiously taken her headphones and plugged them into Martha’s computer to listen to her beats, without asking her. Shaniqua smiles and starts nodding her head saying “Oh, that’s awesome”. She keeps listening, and then, asks with surprise “How’d you do that?” Martha, smiling, looks very proud.

By day two, this interaction was much more overt, even in the middle of otherwise structured activities:

Students are still sharing headphones – now they are standing up, listening to each other’s work and walking around discussing what they sound like. They may look like they are ‘disengaged’ in their activity, but they are talking about their beats, and interacting, with offerings such as: “Oh, it just needs a bit of this and then it would be perfect”. Karim is listening to something on his phone, trying to find a sound from a favourite song to put in his beat. Now Karim, ASAP Ferg, Shiny, Geoffrey, Shaniqua and Martha are all interacting and sharing headphones, and really seem to be connecting with each other through that; they seem quite open and excited to listen and share their music and ideas. Felicia and Maharek are listening to each other’s beats too, and Shaniqua joins them. Apart from Kiren (sitting off to himself), everyone appears really engaged in the music, discussing the different musical elements; not really playing up or being disengaged, but engaging with each other about/through the music.

While this scene could easily be interpreted as disengaged, the opportunities it provided for social connection seemed significant. Throughout the program, this kind of interaction appeared to provide several important ways for participants to connect, and get to know each other better. During the focus group, students spoke about learning each other’s musical preferences, and some suggested they had formed close bonds: “[now] this guy’s like my brother!” This extended to a sense of mutual respect and support:

**Interviewer:** What was best thing is about [the program]?

**Felicia:** Making beats.

**Interviewer:** Anything else?

**ASAP Ferg:** Communicating to everybody in a positive manner.

**Facilitator:** Can you tell me more about that?

**ASAP Ferg:** Like, maybe outside all of us have hardly any similarities and everybody don't really talk to each other, and maybe some people might hate each other. But when we went into that classroom everybody was just like getting along and listening to each other's beat and complimenting each other and that.

**Shiny:** Yeah, just to continue on from him, like they would give you feedback.

**Geoffrey:** Yeah, because when I was mixing Swimming Pools I let Karim listen to it, and he was like really supportive about it.

**Shaniqua:** Yeah same, I know.

**ASAP Ferg:** And we all helped each other out, as well.

This social support was observed on several occasions, including when showing back beats as a group, and more specific interactions such as the following on day two:

Karim is asking ASAP Ferg to rap his written verse in front of them, encouraging him by saying "Swag it out bro, com on bro, grab your book, and come here, swag it out!". ASAP Ferg came over and they put their headphones on to listen to the beat Karim had been making. Geoffrey was standing behind ASAP Ferg with his hands on his shoulders to support him, while Shaniqua stands by. ASAP Ferg starts rapping, and Karim adds "Yep!" after every line to support like a hype man at a show. Shaniqua starts laughing, and Karim tells her to "Shut up!", indicating that she should be being more supportive. She joins in supporting Ferg through the rest of the verse and congratulating him when its finished.

### Building rapport with facilitators

All participants reported how the program also fostered connection between students and facilitators:

**ASAP Ferg:** If you guys came again would it be the exact same people that came?

**Interviewer:** Would you want to have the same?

**Unanimous:** Yes.

**Interviewer:** Why?

**Karim:** Because!

**Geoffrey:** Because they understand us all now, they know what we like.

**Maharek:** Because they're sick!

**Shaniqua:** Yeah, because if someone else comes they won't know [our jokes], and it won't be funny.

Further, this connection was fostered consciously by both facilitators and students:

Karim is enjoying talking about his favourite artists with other students, and is really engaging and connecting with the facilitators. He is now going around the room making sure he knows all of our names (me, RMT and HHFs), and asking if they are doing this next year. Others start asking if the HHFs get paid to do this, and asking more about their work and lives as artists.

### Space for intercultural exchange

These opportunities for open interaction also appeared to afford a space that fostered discussion around intercultural understanding. Hip Hop was the preferred genre for most students, but some preferred genres like Pop, Electronic, and Metal. While this may have been a cause for division in the group, the sessions provided a space to explore and discuss musical cultures that were strange to some, but 'native' to others:

Geoffrey was sharing his favourite songs with Matt, which is metal. Now he offers to show Karim, who responds "I don't want to listen to your metal!", and then after a short reflective pause, "Well, I'll listen to it, but it's scary!". Geoffrey responds, "Oh, well the rap that you listen to is what I find terrifying". They both listen to the Metal song, and discussion ensues about the differences between their preferred styles of music which is inquisitive and respectful.

That Karim was willing to listening to music that he found "scary", suggests that (in this space) he was open to acknowledging an engaging with music that he clearly did not identify with his own cultural experience. A similar interaction was observed between Karim and Kiren, who admitted he didn't

listen to Hip Hop, but preferred Electronic and Pop music. Focus group data revealed that, while most group members bonded through their interest in Hip Hop, Kiren and Geoffrey's preferences were not only acknowledged and welcomed by the group, but seen as representing key parts of their cultural identity.

The notion of intercultural understanding also emerged around religion and race. This included the following interactions observed on day two:

Students are all talking again. Karim and Shiny are talking about their religion and ethnicity, and Shiny talks about being born in Ethiopia. Karim excitedly shares that he has the same background; obviously something they had not discussed before given their three-year age gap. They continue, talking about religion, and several students talk about their connection to Islam. Karim responds, "Oh, well, I'm Muslim, but I don't go to church". Seems we now are seeing interaction beyond music – the energy feels very open, like a safe space to talk about these issues. Case in point, the Karim and Shiny start discussing when and where it's ok to say "the N word", particularly in the context of a Metro Boomin song, where it is part of the lyrics.

Later, students started discussing Donald Trump and related issues of race and class. This evolved into a discussion about cultural appropriation, after the African students tell Shaniqua to "Stop trying to be Black" in the way that she talks. While these discussions were blunt, there was little to no animosity involved. Rather, it appeared students took the opportunity afforded by the open atmosphere to discuss these topics.

### Self-Expression

A key benefit that emerged in all data sources related to self-expression. This appeared early on the first day through observations of students making their first beats:

Kiren is smiling to himself as he listens back to a beat he is making. I've seen this several times with different students now; each at their own workstation with their headphones on, having private moments and smiling to themselves as if to say, "Wow, I just did that, it sounds amazing!" It seems as if these smiles are involuntary, as the

students appear to be trying to contain or keep them hidden.

The HHFs shared similar observations, and linked this back to the accessibility of beat making equipment like the Ableton Push, and the ability they afford to "get a very recognisable rhythm instantly", and that in the "first maybe, 20 minutes, they've actually got a beat and it's a beat that is real". Further, they suggested this was applicable across music genres:

**Christos:** Giving everyone a choice to try different things is really important and again, it's not specifically Hip Hop [...] a kid, for example, may have their own native type of music, they will program the drums completely differently to someone who's from a different culture, so [...] it's another way to tap into something that they have inherently in their DNA, you know. That sort of thing is just a form of tapping into a self-expression.

### Personal development

Sharing private moments of self-expression through group show-back appeared to foster moments of positive self-concept. Some expressed this explicitly, while others stifled smiles as the group applauded or danced to their contributions.

Students' own progression within the program also appeared to nurture self-esteem and efficacy. Initially, Shaniqua struggled with beat making, refusing to share her beats, and focusing instead on talking and listening to others' music. Picking up on this, the HHFs spent significant one-on-one time with her to explain the process in different ways and encourage her expression. With time, this seemed to foster a level of self-mastery and confidence:

Shaniqua seems much prouder and more confident of her music, and is now willing to play it to the HHFs. She's now listening to Martha's, and suggesting how she could add some more drums. Suddenly she says, "Listen to mine". [Towards the end of the session] she is now mock-bragging, "You should be paying me to do this, I'm so good!"

Christos supported this idea of personal development, stressing the "importance" and "beauty" of "being able to create a sense of self" through the beat making activities. Davey

continued that beat making in this way can “encourage playfulness”, allowing students to “have a crack and not be scared, play around and make mistakes”, which ultimately leads to “building that confidence”.

The students themselves reinforced this notion during the focus group with comments including “I just think everything is possible”, which suggests a sense of empowerment. This idea of student empowerment was echoed by the RMT when discussing Martha, who was almost non-verbal in sessions, but had continued beat making outside the sessions:

**Matt:** After the first session, every single night she had been making beats at home with an online emulator of the hardware and software that was being used. [T]hat’s a fantastic resource for her for self-expression, for continued engagement in music making, and that was going on beyond the program. And not only that they, she sorted it out herself; she didn’t just take a piece of information and go, “All right, that’s the end of the day”. She’s actually empowered. She’s applied it and she’s empowered to continue this particular act of music making [...] there’s a level of engagement in music that has actually had a follow-on effect just from that first day. [That’s] very valuable for identity formation in teenagers, feeling like you’re confident and feeling like you can express yourself and have capacity to do, to actually say something. She might not have the capacity to verbalize her feelings and words but she might be able to compose these things and actually create a level of depth in her life.

### Learning and educational engagement

From the first session, students appeared immediately engaged in the educational aspect of the program:

Started off with some interactive activities, playing some songs and getting students to identify different instruments/elements. Facilitators ask them to think about the structure of music and the instruments, like a music education class. Several students are getting into it. It feels like they don’t realise they’re participating in a classroom experience, but they are calling out answers, volunteering to come to the front and interacting with the facilitators, who give them fist bumps for having a go.

Here it appeared that the change of scenery, the presentation of the facilitators, and the content of the program seemed to engage the students almost immediately. When reflecting on why they liked the program, students supported this notion, offering responses such as “it was interesting to learn” and “I think it was very, very, very educational”. Further, while some linked this to missing regular class, others suggested it was because they were learning something that was relevant to their own life experience. Some expressed this as being “good to know something real and all that shit”, others because “We’re learning something that we want to do”. Another claimed it linked to long time aspirations:

**Geoffrey:** Yes, when I saw [the Push controller] I’m thinking, “I know what they are but I’ve never used one before in my life”, because some of my favourite artists, they would use them on stage to go with their music and it’s really cool how they do that. So, I’m really glad and amazed that I could find out to actually do one myself this year in school. So, I found that really fun to learn how to do it and I would happily continue doing that.

### Peer to peer learning

Peer to peer learning also became a significant element of the program. This grew from small interactions on the first day, to a major element of the second day. Further, it was something that grew organically between the students without any direction from the facilitators:

They have established amongst themselves who is remixing the same songs. Martha asks Shiny where he put the marker on his song, because they are doing the same one: “Where’d you put it?”, Shiny replies “Wait, I’ll come”. It’s clear they are starting to learn from each other, independent from the HHFs. This is peer to peer learning, and some of them are starting to take on certain roles within the group.

These roles referred to one’s ability to master a certain activity, and then share that with the others: Karim is looking at Shaniqua’s computer and the activity, and exclaims “Oh my god, you haven’t done anything!” Karim looks at me, and asks “Can I grab her computer and help her?” I reply, “Yep”. He helps her and exclaims “That’s it!” Shaniqua

appears happy and appreciative of the help. Now Karim is asking about the next step, and asks Shiny to come and help him get onto what he was meant to be doing. They now appear to be helping each other through the activities, only asking for help from the HHFs when needed.

## Development of musicality

Students were clear that “learning how to make beats” and “learning about music” were key benefits from the program. This helped them to have “more music in [their] lives”, which they saw as a necessary part of their schooling experience and a key reason for why they would argue for another program like this; “We need music in our lives, and if we make our own music then we could have potential in life”. The ability for the program to foster this was reported on several occasions. Along with Martha’s use of the emulator described above, when asked what they got out to the program, another student answered; “On a YouTube channel [you can find instrumental songs, so] if anyone want to spit a rap and all that, [or] you can download [them]”.

As ASAP Ferg described, some saw this as valuable in their lives, “It’s like creative, and it’s like having a special talent if you rap”. Others suggested more explicit connections to identity, including affiliation with different styles or artists, and telling me about the “stage names” they had crafted throughout the project.

Like Geoffrey (see quote above), others connected musical development to life aspirations:

**Karim:** You know It’s actually my dream to make a beat.

**Interviewer:** Really?

**ASAP Ferg:** Yeah, to make music, same [with me].

**Karim:** And to become a producer. Like Metro Boomin, cuz.

**Geoffrey:** Keep following that, don’t let it down.

**Karim:** No, if I fail Year 12 I’m going to [be a] producer

**Geoffrey:** Yeah, that’s your back-up plan.

## Careers

As the previous exchange suggests, the “potential in life” related to increased musicality often linked to career aspirations. Students frequently enquired how the facilitators got their jobs, and where they could continue learning about or accessing beat making equipment after the program. Several students explicitly asked facilitators about potential job opportunities, including, Geoffrey who asked if he could volunteer with Sound of the Future in an administrative role, or help out in the studio. Others like Kiren talked about how they wanted to apply beat making to existing career ventures:

**Kiren:** So, I started a vlog channel.

**Interviewer:** What’s that sorry?

**ASAP Ferg:** Kiren just told me that he wants to make his own music for his channel and that’s why he likes to do this.

**Kiren:** See, I want to be like Vice channel.

This suggests, even if being a musician is not a goal, beat making can be seen as relevant to both personal and professional trajectories; in Kiren’s case, a valuable skill that could support work in the growing field of online entrepreneurship.

## Factors that affected outcomes:

### Presentation of Facilitators

The presentation and approach of the Hip Hop facilitators emerged as central to program benefits. That all four adults (Christos, Davey, Matt and the first author) dressed and spoke casually, seemed to set a relaxed, informal, but engaging atmosphere that students connected with from the beginning. The HHFs in particular embodied a Hip Hop aesthetic; a demeanor that suggested they were ready to relate to the students as budding beat makers, rather than disengaged students. This included a number of conscious acts in which the HHFs sought to disassemble the traditional classroom hierarchy:

Christos and Dave are asking students to call them by their first names, as students keep calling them “Sir”. This feels like an overt way of disassociating

themselves with the establishment. Later, Christos stops the session and tells all students “Ok guys, don’t call me sir, my name is Chris”; the students start calling out “Sir! Sir!”, and Christos laughs “Ahh, I shouldn’t have said anything, should I?”

Along with simple things such as fist bumps, and not reprimanding students for things that would normally be frowned upon in classrooms, these interactions appeared to signal an authentic and genuine desire (and ability) to relate to the students. While the facilitators noted the length of the program hindered their ability to build rapport, students reported feeling that the facilitators “understand us all now”, suggesting rapport was fostered.

The ability for these facilitators to present as authentic Hip Hop artists, including sharing their experience and involvement in the local Hip Hop scene, also appeared to make a significant impact on engagement. It appeared important they could live up to these claims by demonstrating their beat making skills, beat boxing when explaining the structure of a classic Hip Hop beat, and being able to meet students’ challenges to rap.

Similarly, the HHFs were clear that everyone needed to be supportive and respectful of other people’s musical contributions. It appeared that the Hip Hop persona enabled the facilitators to maintain the fine line of being firm in setting boundaries, yet remaining open and approachable as the adults in the room.

The HHFs also remained supportive of each student throughout the program, taking the time to work patiently one-on-one when they were struggling or losing focus. This also showed in show back sessions, both in supporting the musical contributions of those that did share, while not forcing those who did not feel comfortable to do so. HHFs also appeared authentic in their encouragement.

### Linking to musical preferences

While both facilitators were clear in locating the activities within the stylistic conventions of Hip Hop, they were open to supporting students who

consciously, or naturally, made beats in different styles like Metal, Pop and Electronic. They also recognized the need to acknowledge and cater for the growing diversity within Hip Hop music:

**Davey:** It’s a lot different to what Hip Hop was when we were first getting into it. That’s something we have to all embrace and accept and not try to say “It’s got to be Boom Bap and it’s got to be 93 BPM [...] because ultimately the future is Hip Hop, and [while the new sound] is not amazing to me, it’s dope to them. So, I think that we have to stay informed and on top of what’s happening in the mainstream to get them excited.

**Christos:** It’s important.

**Davey:** If you don’t go and get over this old school mentality, they’re like, “Oh boring, that’s not for me”. You have to somehow really tie it to what is happening now [...] to not just be that old dude, you know, “Rah, rah, rah”, because then you just become that boring teacher.

Students saw this as important, noting that “other people have different [musical] choices”, and suggested an even wider repertoire for things like the remix activity would have been beneficial:

**Shiny:** There wasn’t like enough beats. Like some people like a band, like Rock style music, like him [points to Geoffrey], and they didn’t have it in there or they didn’t have like Trap music as well.

**Interviewer:** So, a wider range of tunes?

**Geoffrey:** Exactly, yeah, a wider range of tunes.

**Karim:** Yeah, some people are different, some people they like Trap, Rock, R’n’B...

Despite this call for greater diversity, the HHFs deep knowledge of Hip Hop enabled them to connect with most students through discussing certain artists, and the particularities of their beats and rapping styles. This appeared significant for establishing a connection through shared knowledge of a musical culture.

Further, locating the program within (most) students’ musical cultures seemed important for enabling the social connection between students, and engagement in learning. It appeared to provide a common ground; a cultural space in which most students already felt a sense of connection,

knowledge, or agency, which in turn provided a base to engage with others and the program.

### **The role of Hip Hop**

While many benefits and program factors already discussed could be related to any music program, Hip Hop did appear to play a significant role. All but two (Kiren and Geoffrey) students felt a close connection with Hip Hop, which they expressed often throughout the program and focus group, including comments from Shaniqua on the first day: “Who doesn’t like Hip Hop?” This sometimes extended beyond the music, with most students engaging in contemporary Hip Hop dance moves during sessions, and one student who was keen to show his “breakdance moves” during the focus group.

This strong connection with Hip Hop was supported by staff, “These kids love Hip Hop, and some of them have a history of Hip Hop engagement through their siblings”. Such familial links were confirmed by the students, many of whom talked about being introduced to Hip Hop through cousins, siblings, and parents. Therefore, explicitly locating this as a Hip Hop program appeared to not only connect to students through popular youth culture, but in these cases a deeper shared family culture, thus supporting a growing body of literature stating that Hip Hop engagement is intergenerational (Elligan, 2004). Here, these connections appeared fundamental to engagement:

**Christos:** I went around and asked what do you listen to and who are the artists that you listen to? And, nearly everyone was talking about a Hip Hop artist, or R&B. But the thing about it was, this particular program suited their musical tastes, and meant that their actual cultural engagement with music is being recognised through Hip Hop. So, this activity is actually supporting their engagement with their own cultural understandings or experiences of music. So, it’s deep, it’s a big thing.

There was also a recognition of the diversity that Hip Hop and beat making can accommodate:

**Davey:** The thing with Hip Hop is that it’s such a universal type of music. You know, you can make Hip Hop using Arabic music, you can make Hip Hop using African music, so you can pretty much use anyone’s culture and make music out of it, I think that’s what’s so unique about Hip Hop. You know, you can use anyone’s background, anyone’s tradition, anyone’s idea and lay down a track with it.

This was observed during the program with Geoffrey, who worked to mix elements from Metal music into his beats. In the focus group, Geoffrey suggested this was “weird” but engaging and something he “would definitely do again”. This speaks to Elligan’s (2004) notion of “Rap Not Otherwise Specified”, which refers to the vast amount of music which blends stylistic elements of Hip Hop with other genres, extending its ability to engage a wide cross-section of society.

### **Equipment and space**

The beat making equipment was seen by staff, students, and facilitators as significant for promoting program benefits. It seemed clear that students were both impressed and engaged by the large P.A. speakers and other equipment as soon as they entered the room, and the fact they all had access to their own laptop and Push controller. The Push Controllers in particular emerged as an important element; students quickly learnt the basics of choosing sounds, and making beats using the back-lit drum pads and step-sequencer. Throughout the entirety of the program and focus group, students made consistent references to liking the controllers, and regularly enquired about purchasing or accessing them after the program. The schools’ wellbeing coordinator, who visited the session on the first day, also gave strong feedback on the controllers, “particularly the tactile nature of what they were doing, because [the students] don’t often get the chance to do that kind of stuff”.

The presence of the big speakers also seemed important, lending the program a sense of being “real” or “authentic” in being able to emulate a club or studio. This was particularly evidence during

show back sessions, when students' beats were played back loudly, encouraging students to cheer and dance. The program space also helped facilitate this, as it was located at one end of a school in a diamond shaped classroom that did not share walls with any other classroom. This aligns with existing literature stating the necessity of appropriate spaces for quality school music programs (Crooke & McFerran, 2015).

### Non-traditional learning environment

A program factor that was important for the education and learning outcomes of the program linked to its ability to provide a non-traditional learning environment. This environment can be understood as representing how the culmination of the previous factors (combined with the engaging nature of the activities) provided a space in which students felt sufficiently outside of their normal classroom or school setting, but that it still retained enough structure to facilitate learning. As the students suggested in the focus group, while they considered school "still boring", in the program they were a lot happier and better able to learn because of the activities, content and approach.

This somewhat links to what Rodríguez (2009) calls the radical pedagogical approach Hip Hop offers. Ultimately, this speaks to ability for Hip Hop to both engage young people, and disrupt the power dynamics replicated in traditional schooling contexts which further alienate 'disengaged' students.

### Challenges

There were significant challenges that impeded the potential of the program to foster stronger benefits. The most obvious reported by all participants related to the short overall length of the project. HHFs reported this significantly reduced their ability to build rapport with the students:

**Christos:** I don't feel that we built the rapport that we have in the past with young people and I think that's really important, just building those

relationships which I think was lacking in these workshops. Again, that comes with time, which we didn't have much of. It was kind of just getting in and work, work, work, work, work.

This extended to the ability for students to connect with each other:

**Christos:** Collaboration is one of the biggest things. It's one thing, people sitting there and learning. But the one thing we really like is for people to mix up and collaborate and really get amongst each other and work with each other. That's such an important part, the social aspect of the program.

Observations supported this, noting the streamlined program structure placed significant focus on learning activities, leaving less space to explore and foster wellbeing outcomes. This was considered significant given the original intention to more fully explore wellbeing benefits in this study.

Other factors which appeared to limit wellbeing outcomes included the lack of time and appropriate opportunities for the RMT to engage in wellbeing related activities. Further, while identified by staff as disengaged and at risk, the group was observed as relatively well-functioning, an observation confirmed by the RMT. Therefore, the lack of observable wellbeing outcomes may also relate to existing evidence that suggests capturing the ability for a school music program to improve wellbeing is problematic when participants are relatively well-functioning (Crooke & McFerran, 2014).

### Discussion

Despite significant limitations, the above results suggest the Hip Hop and beat making program investigated in this study promoted a range of student benefits. While these related to different areas of student experience, the theme of student engagement emerged as significant; being both the reason why students were considered "at-risk" and referred to the program, and the most obvious benefit present in the data. The consistent references to engagement throughout the project led us to consider different interpretations of this

concept. This included whether staff use of the word referred to more traditional notions of a well-behaved student, and whether this notion failed to account for students who engaged in different ways. This potential disconnect around conceptualisations of engagement was supported by Hip Hop facilitator, Davey:

**Davey:** I did overhear the run down the teacher gave of each student [and] I kind of figured it out who he was talking about as the day went on [.] But then [...] I thought, well, maybe they're just easily distracted and probably not interested in what they are doing, so obviously that's going to create that disengagement [but in the program] they were quite well behaved.

This potential dissonance is supported by existing literature, which stresses school engagement is multidimensional (Reschly & Christenson, 2012), manifesting across personal (Li & Lerner, 2013), social, community, and educational domains (Finn & Zimmer, 2012). Recent research which explored how these different types of school engagement can be supported by music, also explains how a certain type of engagement in one setting, may seem chaotic in another (McFerran, Crooke, & Bolger, 2017).

In this case, it appeared that while students were capable of engaging in a range of activities – from learning tasks and positive social interaction, to discussions of careers and race – it required a setting and subject matter that was conducive to their engagement. In this case, it was a program that centred on Hip Hop, and which was delivered by facilitators in a setting that were seen as simultaneously disconnected from their traditional schooling experience, yet related to their personal worlds. Here, Hip Hop appeared to play an important role; it provided a central theme and subject matter that students noted as both relevant to their own life experiences, and something that most of them felt knowledgeable or confident with. As scholars argue, this enables students a sense of connection to, and base level of mastery around, a topic – a base from with they are able to engage and extend themselves. US-based scholars have long seen this potential for Hip Hop in education.

As Stovall (2006) claims, because Hip Hop links to students lived cultural experience, it can “introduce educational relevance [...] Developing relationships based on familiarity and importance, students have the greater propensity to grasp concepts originally considered foreign or ‘uninteresting’” (p. 586).

Equally important in this project were the HHFs themselves. The casual yet respectful approach seemed instrumental in setting a conducive environment, while their position as Hip Hop artists situated them as valued by the students, and able to relate to them in ways that were more consistent with their own youth culture and identity. Further, what they offered as facilitators (i.e. beat making and rapping skills) was seen as both authentic and valuable to the students on a number of levels.

Combined, it appeared that these key factors were capable of fostering student benefits within the short space of the two-day program. Interestingly, as the facilitators reflected during the focus group, the ability for the program to foster engagement, behaviour and attendance also meant it met the goals of the staff who referred the students:

**Davey:** The other thing that's interesting is [the staff member] that came and told us that these students are all disengaged; in coming to school, class and with different people [.] For me, I felt like I saw all the students engaged [.] They were definitely displaying that stuff. In that way, it did what [the staff] were hoping.

Despite the current findings, more research is necessary to further explore both the benefits reported here, as well as the factors that emerged to support them. Ideally, this would include a longer program that allows students and facilitators to form more significant relationships, and more time for benefits to emerge. In order to foster more significant wellbeing outcomes, it is also recommended that time be taken to design programs suited to such outcomes; ideally in a way that more fully integrates health professionals, such as music therapists or social workers, in program design and facilitation.

Nevertheless, the current results indicate important potential in the role of Hip Hop and

beat making programs in schools to foster student benefits in a number of areas. Most significantly, this study illustrates this potential in an Australian context.

## Conclusion

This study explored the potential student benefits of a school-based Hip Hop and wellbeing program. While significant limitations related to time and program structure were seen to reduce the potential of the program to impact students' lives and schooling experience, results showed benefits were observable in several key areas, including engagement, learning, social connection, and intercultural understanding. Furthermore, it was identified that the presentation of Hip Hop facilitators, the creation of a non-traditional learning environment, and the centrality of Hip Hop to the program, were seen as valuable for promoting student benefits. While more research is necessary to further explore these findings, they provide important evidence for the potential role that Hip Hop and beat making programs can play in Australian schools.

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