

How Cyphers and School Groups Are Related

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Like Music to My Ears: A Hip-Hop Approach to Social Emotional Learning

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What Are Cyphers within the Context of Hip-Hop Culture?

A cypher is an activity in which rappers express their thoughts lyrically within a small group. During this small group, rappers recite pre-written rhymes, although many of them free-style—express whatever comes to their minds at that moment, without pre-writing their lyrics. During cyphers, rappers will *spit*—meaning rhyme—one after another, and will not interrupt those who are spitting. However, they may add different sounds in response to what the rapper is spitting. Rappers take turns rhyming within the group cypher, usually to rhythmic beats.

The Relationship between Groups and Cyphers

Group is very similar to cyphers because group—similar to cyphers— is a time when students are provided opportunities to express their ideas, thoughts, feelings, and concerns. During groups, students must abide by rules; in cyphers, rappers have unstated rules (not to cut rappers off while they are rhyming, and so on). In hip-hop groups, students discuss their thoughts with instrumental music playing in the background; in cyphers, rappers express their thoughts (lyrically) with instrumental music playing in the background. During groups, students are encouraged to support their peers and work collaboratively; in cyphers, rappers encourage other MCs and work collaboratively. Like cyphers, school groups are therapeutic and allow members to express their thoughts and feelings about life.

There are many similarities between groups and cyphers, and calling groups cyphers removes the clinical feeling that students might experience when discussing thoughts and emotions. Another reason I call groups cyphers is because some students who participated in my groups had been hospitalized at some point and were required to participate in “groups” within the clinical setting. Many of these students had negative experiences within those groups and were turned off by group. Calling our sessions “cyphers” took care of this issue immediately in that the name was not associated with their clinical experiences. Students demonstrated their gifts, talents, and abilities within the context of cyphers.

Engaging Activities Students Embraced within the Context of Cyphers

- word poetry,
- reciting lyrics,
- singing,
- creating beats,
- beatboxing,
- dancing—and other activities that allowed students to express themselves using hip-hop elements.

How to Form Cyphers

Allow students to form a circle and express themselves by rhyming, singing, reciting spoken word, and/or dancing. “Cyphers” is a time when students showcase their gifts, talents, and creative abilities within group. “Cyphers” within groups is an effective way to form relationships with students.

It is important to gauge your students’ comfort level. Some students may be more willing to engage in cyphers compared with other students. Usually, students who are talented and gifted with spoken word and rhyming are usually more willing to start the cyphers off whereas students who are less talented and gifted with rhyming may be more reserved.

Usually, it is important to integrate the actual performance aspect of cyphers—forming a small group and demonstrating hip-hop cultural elements—after students are used to each other, which is why it is important to create engaging icebreakers during the first few group sessions. It is also important that you provide opportunities for students to perform throughout the group sessions to increase their comfort levels of performing in front of their small group.

Content from this article is taken from the book, *Like Music to My Ears: A Hip-Hop Approach to Social Emotional Learning (SEL)*:

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