



ACTs of Creativity Report: Hip Hop, Breakin' and mindfulness in schools

Rationale Arts, Sheffield

Parise Carmichael-Murphy and Nathan Geering

Contents

1.	About Rationale Arts	3
2.	Introduction	4
3.	What do we know about the therapeutic benefits of Hip Hop?	4
4.	The 'ACTs of Creativity' project	6
5.	What feedback did we receive from pupils?	7
6.	What did we learn from the feedback?	9
7.	What is next for ACTs of Creativity?	10
8.	Summary	10
9.	Acknowledgements	11

1. About Rationale Arts

Rationale Arts Charity

Rationale Arts work closely with mental health professionals, including a Cognitive Behavioural Therapist who helped develop 'ACTs of Creativity'. This initiative is rooted in Acceptance & Commitment Therapy and supports individuals living with anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder. Additionally, Rationale Arts has worked with a Neuroscientist to develop the 'Rationale Arts Audio Description Method' to enhance accessibility for visually impaired audiences. Rationale Arts have achieved this by reinventing audio description to incorporate beatboxing, poetry and emotive text, which provide a richer soundscape for people with visual impairment. Rationale Arts also run B-Boying workshops that emphasise injury prevention and improve spatial awareness for people with visual impairment.

The authors

Parise Carmichael-Murphy is a PhD Education student at the University of Manchester. She completed BSc Early Years and Childhood Studies and MSc Psychology at Manchester Metropolitan University. Parise is passionate about Hip Hop education and co-organised the 2021 Hip Hop & Higher Education conference.

tinyurl.com/parisecm

Nathan Geering is the Director of Rationale Arts Charity and the creator of [Rationale Method](#). He is interested in research around the visibility of dance forms for people with visual impairment. Nathan is a trained dancer who specialises in Breakin' and was appointed as the Artistic Director for the 2017 Special Olympics Opening Ceremony.

2. Introduction

In this report, we reflect on the 'ACTs of Creativity' project delivered in schools across Derbyshire, England. We highlight some of the therapeutic benefits of Hip Hop, focusing on Breakin'¹ and mindfulness² and share some of the tools and strategies we used in schools with pupils. We reflect on pupil, teacher, and practitioner feedback to consider the next steps for ACTs of Creativity in schools.

3. What do we know about the therapeutic benefits of Hip Hop?

Hip Hop emerged as a culture and movement, from South Bronx, New York during the 1970s. Hip Hop is often recognised as a global commercial business and a genre of music. However, popular and lesser-known elements of Hip Hop culture include:

- (1) DJing
- (2) Breakin'
- (3) graffiti art
- (4) MCing
- (5) beatboxing
- (6) street fashion
- (7) street knowledge
- (8) street language
- (9) street entrepreneurialism

Breakin' (also known as Breakdancing) incorporates martial arts with dance styles of the African Diaspora. Breakin' featured at the 2018 Summer Youth Olympics and from 2024, will feature as a sport in the Olympic games. More recently, Breakin' has been more readily incorporated into physical health interventions, particularly those related to occupational therapy, for example in injury prevention.

Over the years, Hip Hop scholars have highlighted the therapeutic benefits of engagement in and around Hip Hop culture. Some of the therapeutic benefits of Hip Hop culture have been highlighted in mental health services and as a means of community

¹ An acrobatic dance style that emerged from Hip Hop culture.

² Mindfulness is used to describe activities that encourage individuals to be attentive.

healing.³ Concerning music, Hip Hop lyrics have been used as a tool for change in narrative therapy,⁴ Hip Hop songs have been shown to reduce stress and improve cognitive performance,⁵ and MCing has been highlighted as significant means of voice and empowerment.⁶

There is a lack of research that explores the therapeutic benefits of Breakin' specifically; instead, they focus on injuries associated with the art form. Some literature begins to draw together the therapeutic benefits of hip hop music and dance, particularly when engaging young people. For example, how co-creating dance choreography supports groups to develop bonds and mutual interests.⁷ However, this is very much focused on 'youth' and offers little

exploration of children's experiences across primary schools.

In the UK, Youth Music Charity stresses the importance of schools embracing contemporary music across education to improve and support pupils engagement. Across the US, Hip Hop has been embraced as a pedagogical approach to increase engagement, but Hip Hop as an intervention for increased wellbeing is much less explored.⁸ The majority of studies on Hip Hop activities in schools have been published in the last decade, focus mostly on rap as the medium of delivery, and were most likely to be delivered with high school age pupils (age 13+).⁹ Benefits of school-based Hip Hop interventions include but are not exclusive to: greater student health awareness; behaviour change and increased

³³ Levy, I., Emdin, C., & Adjapong, E. S. (2018). Hip-hop cypher in group work. *Social Work with Groups*, 41(1-2), 103-110. DOI:10.1080/01609513.2016.1275265

⁴ Heath, T., & Arroyo, P. (2014). 'I gracefully grab a pen and embrace it': Hip-hop lyrics as a means for re-authoring and therapeutic change. *International Journal of Narrative Therapy & Community Work*, (3), 31-38. DOI:10.3316/informit.793457631228135

⁵ Arrulo, T. G., Doumas, M., & Papageorgiou, K. A. (2021). Beneath the surface: The influence of music and the dark triad traits on stress and performance. *Current Psychology*, 1-15. DOI:10.1007/s12144-021-01664-0

⁶ Travis, R. (2013). Rap music and the empowerment of today's youth: Evidence in

everyday music listening, music therapy, and commercial rap music. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, 30(2), 139-167. DOI:10.1007/s10560-012-0285-x

⁷ Hayhoe, S., & Geering, N. (2020). Report on the Sound Pad Project: The Co-Creation of Breakdancing, Dance Education and Technology. <https://www.lse.ac.uk/cpnss/assets/documents/2020-LSE-SoundPadReport.pdf>

⁸ Crooke, A. H. D., Comte, R., & Almeida, C. M. (2020, February). Hip Hop as an Agent for Health and Wellbeing in Schools. In *Voices: A World Forum for Music Therapy* (Vol. 20, No. 1). DOI:10.15845/voices.v20i1.2870

⁹ Ibid.

engagement; self-expression and social connection; greater connection to classroom and learning; connection to school and community; psychosocial wellbeing and emotion and behaviour regulation; mutual social support; and openness to counselling.¹⁰

4. The 'ACTs of Creativity' project

In this section, we describe the 'ACTs of Creativity project' that Rationale Arts delivered across schools with children and young people aged 8-16.

What was the aim of the project?

The ACTs of Creativity project embraces the principles of Acceptance Commitment Therapy (ACT) which encourage people to think about and relate to their feelings and emotions. The project aimed to encourage children and young people to learn

about themselves by processing their feelings and connecting with their bodies and emotions using creative and artistic means.

What is Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT)?

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) aims is to increase psychological flexibility to live meaningful lives. It does so by supporting individuals to develop an awareness of their personal values and thoughts and how these relate to the feelings they experience in everyday life.¹¹ By supporting children and young people to distinguish between the self, body, physical feelings and emotions, they are encouraged to recognise events as something that happens rather than a part of the self. ACT looks to encourage psychological flexibility, supporting individuals to recognise the relationship between what they experience and how they think about it.¹²

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Swain, J., Hancock, K., Dixon, A., Koo, S., & Bowman, J. (2013). Acceptance and commitment therapy for anxious children and adolescents: Study protocol for a randomized controlled trial. *Trials*, 14(1), 1-12. DOI:10.1186/1745-6215-14-140

¹² Samuel, V., Constable, C., Harris, E., & Channon, S. (2021). Developing the content of a brief universal acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) programme for secondary school pupils: InTER-ACT. *Pastoral Care in Education*, 1-20. DOI: 10.1080/02643944.2021.1977991

Who took part?

Pupils were aged 8-10 across four primary schools and aged 14-16 at 1 SEN school across one district in Derbyshire, UK. Practitioners delivered forty-eight face-to-face sessions: class sizes ranged from 7-33 pupils, with an average class size of twenty-four. Across the five schools, the average school capacity was 176 with an average of 45.7% of pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM).¹³

How was the project delivered?

The project took place over 8 weeks between April and June 2021, with each class delivered by one person and lasting for 1 hour. Pupils took part in eight sessions. During classes, pupils were encouraged to connect with their bodies and emotions in relatable ways. Practitioners delivered taster sessions to each group who then chose which activity they would like to pursue for the duration of the project. The ACTs of Creativity that

pupils voted to take part in are listed below:

1. Hip Hop dance and Breakin'
2. Beatboxing
3. Using contact staffs¹⁴

Each element was combined with meditative practices and breathing exercises.

5. What feedback did we receive from pupils?

How was feedback received during sessions?

At the beginning and end of each class, pupils were asked to indicate how they were feeling by standing in a designated location in their classroom. Each location was assigned a number that matched a 5-item Likert scale used to rate their feelings. The scale is as follows:

- (1) feeling very bad
- (2) feeling bad
- (3) feeling okay
- (4) feeling good
- (5) feeling amazing

¹³ Data for school capacity and pupils' free school meal eligibility was drawn from: GOV.UK. (2021). Get Information about Schools. <https://www.get-information-schools.service.gov.uk/>

¹⁴ A contact staff is a piece of equipment with weighted ends that is manipulated using the body.

Pupils self-ratings were analysed across the first four sessions at all schools. On average, across all schools and sessions, pupils were less likely to rate themselves as feeling 'very bad', 'bad', 'okay', or 'good' and almost twice (49%) as likely to describe themselves as feeling 'amazing'.

How was feedback received after sessions?

After the project had finished, teachers asked their pupils to produce written feedback on how they felt about the sessions.

Transferable skills

Across feedback, pupils shared how they used the skills from the session outside of the Physical Education (PE) class, particularly within the home. Many pupils wrote about using the breathing exercises in situations where they felt overwhelmed, stressed, or upset.

Describing feelings

Concerning what might be considered more desirable feelings, pupils shared that taking part in the activities provided them with feelings of:

'courage', 'confident', 'braver', 'felt better'

Pupils also used positive words to describe their experiences, such as:

'fabulous', 'like', 'love', 'very positive', 'fun', 'amazing', 'enjoyed', 'wicked'

Pupils wrote often about how their participation had helped them reduce less desirable feelings, a range of words were used to describe less positive emotions including:

'mad', 'angry', 'not positive energy', 'sad', 'stress', 'very sad', 'not smiling', 'anger', 'negativity'

Personal challenges

Pupils tended to feel challenged by the activities physically but also as a social activity. Some pupils described not feeling confident to dance in front of peers, whilst others enjoyed the opportunity to show their peers what they could do. This was described as

an opportunity to 'join in' or 'show off'.

Perceived benefits

Pupils shared that some of the benefits of taking part were helping others, feeling listened to, being able to exercise, demonstrating their abilities, learning a new skill, and having fun with friends. Many pupils shared that they enjoyed the dance movements combined with breathing techniques as they helped them to calm down.

Suggested improvements

Pupils tended to refer to the physical difficulty of the sessions, such as hurting themselves or feeling tired as a negative. A small number of pupils shared that the sessions were sometimes embarrassing or boring.

Teachers' thoughts

We use 'teachers' to refer to school staff who work in the classroom with pupils. We received written or verbal feedback from five teachers across the five schools who felt that their classes

had really enjoyed the session.

Teachers felt that pupils' cooperation skills had developed and that they had learned skills to manage their emotions in positive ways.

6. What did we learn from the feedback?

Asking pupils for feedback:

Children were asked by their teachers how they felt about the sessions. Asking children and young people how they *feel* is quite different to asking them what they *think*. Although not prompted, many chose to give their feedback as a drawing. Interestingly, several pupils chose to draw on their forms. During sessions and on feedback forms, pupils tended to vocalise their experiences of both positive and negative feelings. Pupils gave shared feedback in several ways including: (1) written words, (2) written number rating, (3) drawn images. In an earlier interview, Nathan shared 'the thing with trauma is that the last place it usually comes out of is your mouth'.¹⁵

¹⁵ Abbott, I. (2020). Nathan Geering: Interview. Hip Hop Dance Almanac, 1, 1–16.

<https://www.hiphopdancealmanac.com/post/nathan-geering-1>

Some of the numerical data were collected inconsistently for example in one school, pupils were asked to rate their feelings on a scale of 1 to 4, rather than 1 to 5. It could be possible that pupils responses reflect their enjoyment of the class and should not necessarily be taken as indicators of improved mental health.

Interpreting feedback:

Pupils were asked how they *feel* about the sessions. Interestingly, they often responded with illustrations.

Something to consider here is that children might want to express their feelings in non-written ways.

7. What is next for ACTs of Creativity?

When Breakin', individuals are encouraged to be in the present. For example, being aware of the self and surroundings including what the body is doing, how to move within spaces, and how to respond and connect to cues in the music.

Sessions were initially planned to be delivered to primary and secondary schools, but the return from home to

face-to-face learning during the COVID-19 pandemic meant that schools were understandably not able to commit to the project and face-to-face was the preferred delivery style for this project.

Rationale Arts are now working to develop digital content to support educators to implement Hip Hop life skills in flexible ways that fit the needs of their learners, class, and school. Rationale Arts plan to develop a series of dance and music videos that include aspects of the ACTs of Creativity for teachers to use in classrooms.

8. Summary

In this report, we have highlighted some of the therapeutic benefits of Hip Hop but stressed the need to focus more specifically on the therapeutic benefits of Hip Hop dance movement. Rationale Arts delivered the ACTs of Creativity projects to five schools across Derbyshire to support emotional and mental health for pupils. Reflecting on pupil feedback, the main benefits of taking part in ACTs of creativity include building confidence, learning strategies to calm down, and the opportunity to realise and

demonstrate physical ability. As a result of the ACTs of Creativity project, Rationale Arts is working to develop

digital content to support educators to implement Hip Hop life skills in flexible ways that fit the needs of their learners, class, and school. At first, Breakin' might appear as a continuous series of rapid movements, but we suggest that it offers an important opportunity for children and young people to slow down and to connect with their inner selves, their feelings, their bodies, and their peers.

9. Acknowledgements

We would like to acknowledge the work of the team from Rationale Arts who helped deliver the sessions in schools. Thanks to Jonny Boyle, Chris Brayford and Sam Underwood.

Our thanks also to Dr Alex Mason for providing feedback on an earlier draft of this report.



@RationaleArts

Info@rationalearts.com

www.rationalearts.com

Registered charity number: 1181681