



**May Music Bridge the Gap!**  
**How Downbeat Collective is Helping Young People**  
**in the South Bronx Find their Voice and Reclaim their Space**  
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## INTRODUCTION

Music has provided the soundtrack for global movements and provides people with tools to reflect on their experiences and lift themselves up from the depths of social and political anxiety. In 1964, Nina Simone wrote her first civil rights anthem, “Mississippi Goddam,” to speak on the tragedies of the Birmingham 14th Street Church Bombing and the assassination of Medgar Evers. In 2018, Donald Glover, debuted his unforgettable “This is America” music video, where he depicts capitalism, gun violence, and police brutality while calling to question what freedom means on blood-soaked, stolen land. Music bridges the gap between the reality we fight to overcome and the world we can self-actualize as communities with capacity to visualize, inspire, and organize. Music provides not only the language that fuels expression and radical unity but also the courage to speak up in the face of fear, injustice, inequity, and the oppressive systems that facilitate our shared experiences in society.

There are grave implications if music is not introduced to young people as a tool for healthy self-exploration and solidarity. Quantitative studies prove that music education improves literacy rates among children as young as four-years-old while boosting academic performance, student success, and self-esteem.<sup>1</sup> Although results from studies across the nation call for more investment in music, public school budgets tighten, followed by a decline in designated arts classrooms, teachers, and community partners. The capacity for arts education in New York City’s public schools is dwindling, and the effects are most palpable in low-income schools. According to Comptroller Stringer’s 2014 report titled the *State of the Arts* across the city 16 percent of schools have no arts or cultural partnerships and 10 percent of schools have no dedicated arts room while 28 percent lack even one full-time, certified arts teacher and 20

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<sup>1</sup> Kelstrom, Joyce M. “The Untapped Power of Music: Its Role in the Curriculum and Its Effect on Academic Achievement.” *NASSP Bulletin*, vol. 82, no. 597, 1998, pp. 34–43.

percent have neither a full- nor a part-time certified arts teacher. [...] More than 42 percent of schools that lack either full-time or part-time certified arts teachers are located in the South Bronx and Central Brooklyn while nearly half of the schools that lack both a certified arts teacher and an arts or cultural partnership are located in the South Bronx and Central Brooklyn.<sup>2</sup>

Historically, the Bronx has been divested of, burned down, and criminalized in spite of its role as a hub of culture and progress. Hip Hop, a genre with international impact, was born in the Bronx. The power of this community is forgotten when it comes to funding education and extracurricular programs, perpetuating low literacy rates, poor civic engagement, and a stifled sense of self. The Bronx has one of the lowest literacy rates out of the five boroughs. “Forty percent of children living in the Bronx are living in poverty [and] a child raised in poverty is 13 times less likely to finish high school on time, if at all.”<sup>3</sup> The article continues, “the bulk of third graders in the South Bronx haven’t caught up yet, with 70 percent of third grade students unable to read on grade level...The New York City Department of Education has found that children who fail to meet the third grade benchmark are more likely to drop out of high school and remain in poverty.” What will it take to improve the academic conditions so that Bronx students are supported and so that disparities in education are addressed? Young people of color and queer youth are stripped of their safety, confidence, and culture and told they are not good enough to escape their living conditions, let alone create anything worthy of praise. A comprehensive and community-based music education program might be the answer.

I created Downbeat Collective as a response to the need for music and mentors. Founded in 2019 with a team of five mentors and a rotation of volunteers, our non-profit music mentorship program seeks to address the needs of young people. We know children living in poverty have

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<sup>2</sup> "State Of The Arts: A Plan To Boost Arts Education In New York City Schools."

<sup>3</sup> “Bronx Barriers: Literacy Challenge.” *Norwood News*, 21 Feb. 2017,

robust personalities and Downbeat Collective seeks to build upon their strengths, curiosities, and gifts. Offering an opportunity for mentors and mentees alike to serve and be served. Our primary objective is to present the technical and social aspects of music creation in an empowering way. We introduce the skills required for effective networking through collaboration and display local resources and outlets to highlight the strength of the South Bronx. Downbeat Collective is committed to offering young people opportunities to create through music production, songwriting, recording, and performing. We consistently bring in local community organizers and artists to prove that making music and making a difference do not require anything outside of ourselves. Our goal is to support young people as they explore their voice through music making, dialogue, and consistent collaboration. We encourage team building through the program goal of co-creating a mixtape while curating and performing at a culmination showcase.

With a curriculum inspired by Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, my goal is to build awareness about how vital our experiences and perspectives are in finding creative solutions to community problems. Throughout this essay, I explore the texts that serve as our cornerstone. The academic literature and public grassroots project are woven together as I walk through the preparation and weekly programming of the collective at East Side House. With conversations, observations, photographs, and reflections, I attempt to provide a clear understanding of the lessons I learned, the gratitude I feel, and the teamwork that was accomplished through the continued support and mentorship of Mellon Public Humanities Grant.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

*Pedagogy of the Oppressed* serves as the foundational text used to discern Downbeat Collective's mission, curriculum, and methodology. In chapters one through three, Freire breaks down the need for a liberating pedagogy that asserts the oppressed as the *subjects*, not objects, of

their own lives. Students are the factory workers of the classroom, a metaphor offered by professors who have noted the layout of the classroom and its factory-like nuances. In the traditional classroom, students face forward in straightened rows, the clock is purposefully mounted, and the tone is set that for however-many-hours students are supposed to receive the knowledge from their manager, the teacher. “But” as Freire shares knowingly, “while both humanization and dehumanization are real alternatives, only the first is the people’s vocation” (43). It is clear the public-school system is flawed and, not for lack of trying, cannot seem to achieve overall student success. Teachers are overwhelmed by the number of students as well as their diverse needs. With an unforgiving curriculum and unyielding standardized tests, a path to connection and balance remains obscure.

In the traditional classroom, the “banking” concept of education has been the remedy for the dilemma educators find themselves in. The “banking” concept in education is the process by which the “superior” and “all knowing” teacher “deposits” information into the “inferior” and “ignorant” students (72). However, students are *not* accounts to deposit into. Nor is knowledge a wealth that can be accrued this way. Instead, Freire suggests a “problem-posing” method in which all present are both students and teachers, eliminating the hierarchy, and allowing for a mutable process where all learn and teach, where all are shaped by and are shaping others (47).

James Walsh, Colorado-based actor and educator provides a useful paradigm for how Freire’s work can be used in activism-based arts education. His text, *Denver’s Romero Theatre Troupe: Welcoming Working-Class Voices in Higher Education and Revitalizing Class-Based Activism through Organic Theatre*, explores the work of the Romero Theatre Troupe which applies liberatory pedagogy to produce organic theatre. Inspired by the work of Freire, James Walsh started a grassroots movement of storytelling through community dialogue, improvisation, collaboration, and performances that engage audiences during shows in hands-on ways. Their

troupe-composed plays highlighting working-class experiences while consciously centering diverse actors, audiences, and voices. They operate without a budget or staff because, much like in co-operative living, the troupe is sustained through the non-material and material investments from the volunteers, eliminating hierarchies.

Starting as a theatre class at the University of Colorado Denver, they made spontaneous improvisation a focal point as a response to the banking concept of education. Every class or theatre troupe gathering began with a community circle on the floor with a candle lit in the center as people shared about their lives and where their journey took them that day. Walsh explains this is where the authentic sense of community as well as most of the ideas for the plays stem from. They achieved a student-centered classroom that, like Freire advised, pulled inspiration from the experiences the students were coming into the classroom with.

There is no director in the troupe, only consensus-based decision making. Walsh explains, “Larger decisions that relate to our mission and work are made by the Romero community. This ensures that all of our members have a hand on the steering wheel, shaping our work and our values. It is not always a neat and tidy process, but the center always holds” (122). Although Downbeat works with children, I believed it would be advantageous to adopt this perspective.

Elizabeth Gould’s *Companionable Species: A Queer Pedagogy for Music Education* is a radical text that not only speaks to the importance of teaching queer theory in the (arts) classroom but calls into the question why we, as a culture, interrogate the natural identities of people instead of criticizing the binary boxes of society that make it necessary to have things like exclusion, discrimination, and under-representation in the first place. Though unspoken, this perspective aids in our work of renormalizing being a human/non-human (plants, animals, Earth) People and denormalizing the racist, sexist, capitalist structures common in institutions. When explaining the title term and theory of the text, Gould writes, “We are messmates at table, the terms of which do

not exist a priori, but which we co-create — a table at which all are guests and no one is host” (63). The work in the classroom is not only to “include queer perspectives in straight music education” but also to practice committing to seeing people as equal companions, on the journey of making art and meaning in life.

This, more than simply highlighting queer icons or adorning the classroom in rainbow flags, is the work of Downbeat Collective. Gould is advocating not for inclusivity versus the norm of exclusivity, but for the restructuring of the mind to see beyond the binary thinking of us versus them *at all*. As an artist, educator, and activist, my job is to reimagine the world and invite everyone to participate in envisioning and re-creating what we want to see. The work of normalizing individuals and criticizing systems is important in the art world, especially because queer creatives are exploited for their innovative ideas while remaining under/misrepresented. Because so much culture comes from the Black and brown LGBTQ communities and then is popularized, Downbeat Collective plans on giving queer and femme POC artists the space to share their perspectives on music-making and the industry with the children.

Nickki J. Pearce and Reed W. Larson’s article *How Teens Become Engaged in Youth Development Programs: The Process of Motivational Change in a Civic Activism Organization*, analyzes how young people grow when they are invested in extracurricular programs. The examples in this study come from a program called Youth Action, centered on teaching teens civic duty and activism. The issue of engaging young people is crucial to Downbeat Collective because the success of the program relies on the participants taking ownership of both the music-making process and the collective itself. Over a four-month period, Pearce and Larson gathered quantitative evidence from young people explaining what motivated them to become more active and invested in the after-school program.

There are three stages that the teens went through in the civic activism program that increased motivation to participate. The *entry stage* is the reason students became involved in the first place, which in most cases is a requirement or a need to fulfill community service hours. At this stage there is little motivation to participate and students do not identify with the program. Next, there is a *personal connection* that students begin to make as they see the links between the social justice issues they explore in the program and their lived experiences in the community. It was being able to personally identify with the injustices that led them to take a more active role. The team calls these moments of taking personal ownership through a deeply felt connection a *trigger* because it is the catalyst for more motivated youth (123). Finally, once seeing the links between history/theory/policy and the social issues in their lives, students were motivated to get active and become hands-on in changing dynamics to empower their communities. The teens in the program reported feeling extremely energized and motivated by the work they were doing on the grassroots level, leading to fierce ownership over the program.

## **BRIDGING EXPERIENCE AND EXPERTS**

As an Afro-Caribbean genderqueer artist and organizer in New York, I am obligated to speak on my experiences and use my art to openly examine the transphobic, white supremacist, patriarchal, capitalist binary system that was built on the backs of Africans in chattel slavery with the blood of Indigenous Peoples in genocide. As a descendant of African, Indigenous, and Spanish ancestry, I think my existence is a testament to the beautiful struggle against hegemonic colonialism. I contemplate my privilege, power, and purpose in my life and in my music.

**BIG GUN\$ by Santana Sankofa<sup>4</sup>**

**In a city that got big guns,**

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<sup>4</sup> Alvarado, Santana. BIG GUN\$. 14 Feb. 2020.

[https://open.spotify.com/track/7x84JYAB4HFV61CLnnHD4i?si=bQS5BR\\_vSr-\\_dVHY1yKo6g](https://open.spotify.com/track/7x84JYAB4HFV61CLnnHD4i?si=bQS5BR_vSr-_dVHY1yKo6g)



**Mommy why police got the bug guns?  
 And run up in our neighborhoods,  
 And take our little Black boyhood.  
 But big guns just another word for money,  
 So gentrification just another form of violence in the city  
 If you got a baby, sing it with me...**

So when it came to incorporating queer theory into the curriculum to investigate the over consumption and under representation of Black Indigenous Queer Trans People of Color (BIQTPOC) not only in music but in world history, of course I was terrified. I looked to the radical prophets who helped contextualize the world in a way that keeps my humanity as the number one priority, using freedom of expression to become more fully human. James Baldwin, Maya Angelou, Tupac Shakur, Sade, Celia Cruz, Missy Elliot, Prince. These icons remind me that instead of being afraid to prosecute the violent binaries that have marginalized the Black queer community, we must remember the power in our voice. The circumstances we are in today require a response from each of us, in thought, word, and action.

#### **Nicotine Bad by Santana Sankofa<sup>5</sup>**

**I miss my man like nicotine bad like where the f\*\*\* is they at?  
 Not insecure, just a little unsure, if they ever gon' text me back.  
 And by "they," I mean me - please refer to me as "they."  
 Gender is a construct a performance that you do for me,  
 Standing ovation, rave reviews - I give them truthfully  
 But I'm a little bit past that, it's elementary...**

Inherently, Downbeat Collective is a response to our broken public-school system. It is my opportunity to practice a more radical form of education where we can attempt to undo hierarchies, unlearn binary thinking, and give young people the tools to prove to themselves what we as human beings have known all along, that we are free and do not need to ask permission to be ourselves to

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<sup>5</sup> Alvarado, Santana. \*Nicotinebad. 14 Sep. 2019. <https://soundcloud.com/santanaxsankofa/nicotinebad>

the fullest. Through music I uncovered the power of my voice and, with this tool, the responsibility I have to ask the questions that disrupt the oppressor's "normal" way of doing things. As artists and activists, Downbeat Collective's team seeks to empower students by investing in their development as artists who, with the wealth of their curiosity and experience, can find their voice and reclaim the narrative of the South Bronx.

Just as the failures of the "banking" concept prove that no one has an empty mind solely meant to be filled, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* proves that no one can liberate anyone else from oppression. It is only through imagination, dialogue, and the desire that comes with watching someone else free themselves, in spite of fear, that an individual can free themselves. Downbeat Collective is fighting to prove that we are capable of discovering our voices without needing to go searching outside of ourselves. Like James Walsh, music mentors *facilitate* the music making process, while handing over creative control in a way that reminds us that *we are all students* on a journey who can shape and define music over the next decade.

I was inspired by Freire calling on educators to create an environment where everyone involved is both teacher *and* student, simultaneously. The unique experiences and perspectives of students who are developing their voices must be celebrated and prioritized. Downbeat Collective has the unique opportunity to do this because we do not have to adhere to a common core standard. At Downbeat Collective, our goal is to facilitate the music-making process in a way that empowers students to be hands-on and claim their right to creative expression. Downbeat Collective seeks to more succinctly engage students on their identities, passions, goals, and the concerns in their communities. Music is the medium for free expression and exploration so we remind students that their songwriting is radical not simply because they are telling *their* story, but because they are being brave enough to tell the stories of their family, friends, community, and the larger world. When a student speaks, they are speaking from a perspective that surpasses their individual

experience. Therefore, dialogue is the key to unlock how we are connected to one another and to the larger image so that we may begin changing in our neighborhoods and lives.

**At My Best (I Am Love) by Santana Sankofa<sup>6</sup>**

**I hate to be wrong, I hate being wrong  
Just pull my teeth out, baby it feels better  
Rip my hair right out the scalp, it'd feel better**

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**If you ain't prepared to be wrong,  
You won't create nothing original  
And the love we make is so damn original  
Had to capture on a home video**

## **PREPARING & EXECUTING THE PROGRAM**

In preparing for the program, I spent a significant amount of time visualizing what the curriculum and theory would look like when implemented on the ground during this 10-week pilot program funded by the Mellon Public Humanities Grant. Summer 2019, I worked briefly with a handful of young people at the East Side House Settlement community center through the City Council Member's District 8 office and wanted to activate the space. In conversation with the site director, Althea Stevens, I learned that the community center was a hub for after school care and programming for three NYCHA developments (Mill Brook, Mitchell, and Patterson). Throughout the school year, they had little programming because funding for youth activities primarily focused on the summer. This is a safe space hundreds of young people have access to and I knew it would be a great match, especially as a nexus in the Mott Haven. Our services aligned with their needs and we were confirmed to begin programming in February 2020.

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<sup>6</sup> Alvarado, Santana. At My Best (I Am Love). 30 Mar. 2020. <https://soundcloud.com/santanaxsankofa/at-my-besti-am-love>

Downbeat Collective was conceived September 14th, 2018 with an initial mentor and volunteer training workshop that took place January 5th, 2019. This first gathering solidified the team of professional artists, activists, and community stakeholders for future youth programming. Throughout 2019, our conversations centered on the importance of music in *our* lives and the impact consistent mentors could have in young people's lives. For the pilot program, I put together a team of five music mentors: Jeron Randolph (Ignis), Luis Oritz (Muso), Jeziah (Contra\$t), Rick Rodriguez (Rick Bars), and Michael Chris (Feed The Mind).

In conversations leading up to the program, I asked the mentors what they thought they could bring to the table to make the mentorship aspect as engaging as possible. Ignis responded by saying, "I'm always going to vouch for putting in the hard work and being capable of anything. What I'm teaching is just the process of getting there whether they're naturally gifted or not." He went further to say that mentorship was the role of being there for the students through words and action while "being a good example that someone could follow to see there are different ways of doing things." Muso said he could bring his knowledge and show the students the progress of being a beginner at one point but still having further to grow always. As a mentor he would offer himself as a resource, whether they choose to follow his word or not.

Another key aspect of the program is discussing community issues in order to mobilize our collective and create music that not only reflects our experiences as artists - but serves as a catalyst for the larger communal voice. We plan on exploring the following topics: using art as activism to reclaim our space and sound, exploring our sense of self within society, highlighting the silenced voices of women and the LGBTQ community in music, and deepening our understanding of self and communal love. In discussing these expansive topics with the mentors, I was able to discern their understanding of and commitment to these issues.

When asked about the issues we would discuss, which stood out the most to them, Ignis said courage in our uniqueness was important because “we should not have to be afraid to be an individual.” When reflecting on critical race theory as a potential avenue for exploring identity, He responded, “I have a responsibility to learn who I am and recognize I’m a Black man in America on top of the shoulders of giants. The rest will be based on who these kids are.” Muso, who works alongside Ignis and Contra\$t in the Bronx art collective *Listen to the Kids*, highlighted communal love because it is, “pretty general and you can dive into multiple things.” He plans on talking about the 80s and how Hip Hop was at its conception When asked why, he said “so many groups of people in the 80s were just trying to survive together. Gay people did exist during the birth of Hip Hop, even if you don’t hear about them. These groups of artists stuck together and created their own for the sake of the community because spaces did not exist for these people and this music outside of themselves.”



I connected with the East Side House Director of Community Affairs on the issues of literacy, confidence, and the lack of investment in education from representatives. Althea Stevens saw the value in our programming model and our concerns were in tandem. I was then connected to Dianda, the teen program director and Stephani, the youth program director. I was invited to organize a recruitment workshop during an annual Youth Empowerment Summit on Martin Luther King Day in January 2020. I gathered my team of producers and volunteers and we began planning our initial workshop.

During the Youth Summit our team was able to meet the young people, staff, and stakeholders of East Side House. These young people are familiar with East Side House and are comfortable with engaging the space fully alongside their peers. At times the community center

can reach capacity, especially when Downbeat Collective came in and asked for flexibility in space, time, and commitment. However, the program staff were able to assess the needs of the students. It was made clear during our recruitment workshop that there was a lot of love and care in the program and when there are opportunities, like Downbeat Collective, to add to the community's toolkit, they are welcomed and accommodated with respect and gratitude.

At the start of our King Day workshop, I asked the young people, who either excitedly or sheepishly entered the room full of strangers and music equipment, what they loved about music. The students ranged from ages six to twenty-four but the conversation was concise because the consensus was clear: we love music because we can create with total freedom and no mistakes, we can dance and share culture with those we love as well as strangers, and because music is somehow able to take the words out of our mouths and touch our hearts in unshakable ways. The young people were excited to get involved by laying down drum rhythms on beat machines, playing melodies into MIDI keyboards, and freestyling in a cypher used to close out the workshop. While initially nervous that I would have to try and sell the importance of music-making to an uninterested audience, I left the event feeling empowered by the fact that music has drawn people together long before I was born.



The focal questions I had before beginning the program were, “How could I create structure without replicating the hierarchical, banking concept?” and “how would we, as Downbeat Collective, integrate into the community as new members?” On February 7th, the first day of the pilot program, I was reassured that young people were excited about the arts and did not need convincing when given the opportunity to make music. A volunteer, guitarist/drummer, and friend Krys Pimento and I were setting up our materials, when a few third graders came over to figure

out who we were (we had art supplies, instruments, and snacks). They were excited by the prospect of a new music program, although they were too young for the program. A few manageable children turned into a dozen, flooding the previously vacant gym. A handful of students decorated the posters with the available markers while another group gathered around the guitarist, taking turns playing after getting permission. At first, I was excited and able to meet each child with enthusiasm. However, excitement quickly turned to feeling overwhelmed when their energy demanded to be matched and failed to be contained. The rapidly evolving scene only calmed once Stephanie, the youth program director, came and directed the children to their designated classrooms and urged me to say, “No,” clearly in order to gain some control.

I had been waiting for the teenagers of East Side House to turn up because the program was intended for and advertised to them. After thirty minutes of waiting, none showed up. With a classroom of fourth and fifth graders eager to join, my mentors and I decided to invite a small group of these nine- and ten-year olds to give them a chance. We invited seven young people and introduced our program to what would be the beginning of Downbeat Collective’s first cohort. Admittedly, there was some chaos in choosing the students because they were largely uninformed about the program and the teacher primarily chose the students based on behavior, while some students simply raced toward me in a self-selecting fashion. After being chosen, the students and I walked over to the multi-purpose room where the first half of weekly Downbeat programming would take place. Before entering, Stephanie gave them a great pep talk about the importance of patience and listening to ourselves and each other when exploring our creativity.

We started the program by reading the first page of the welcome packet. The students read the mission, goals, and requirements of the program as well as the skills they would gain throughout the ten weeks. The question of the day asked, “what is something you love about music?” They were eager to participate and because of their high level of interest, I felt more

comfortable talking about issues of activism and art without worrying if boredom would leave them disengaged. The introduction dialogue took place in a large circle of chairs where both students and mentors sat down. After the community conversation, students broke into small groups of two or three and worked with music mentors. This process was largely self-selection, as students went to any table with an available chair or a friend they recognized. During pick up, I was able to speak with the students' parents and arouse their interest. Meanwhile, the students were so engaged they didn't want to leave! One of Muso's students, Renae<sup>7</sup>, was so eager she convinced her mom to come back and pick her up at our scheduled seven o'clock dismissal.

From the beginning, the team of mentors and volunteers instituted weekly meetings where we debriefed the session and strategized how we could improve. It was clear by the end of the first day that the mentors enjoyed working with younger kids. With fourth and fifth graders, the team felt we could be role models that planted seeds of confidence, curiosity, and critical thinking before high school, when it might be harder to reach through their jaded exterior. On the other hand, younger children lessened our capacity because this age group was demanding when it came to undivided attention, an example being their tendency to bicker over creative control. I knew we could not have a one on one mentorship program like some mentors suggested because we only have five mentors that make up four groups due to a lack of equipment. A new challenge would be to ensure they were being taught in pairs while not overworking our mentors. I placed volunteers in different mentor groups to provide another sense of support for the young kids. By the end of the first day, we had determined what we would need to prepare for this age group as they could not be expected to walk through the entire music process the same way a teenager might.

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<sup>7</sup> Downbeat Collective students' names have been changed for their protection.





During our second Friday of programming, we explored the importance of the Bronx, as a cultural hub and the birthplace of Hip Hop. After watching a short film about the history of Hip Hop in the South Bronx, we discussed what we love and what we would change about the Bronx. The question of the day was, “If you had a billion dollars, what would you change about your community? How would you go about this?” The students shared that they would pay to provide housing to the homeless and invest in renewable energy that does not rely on fossil fuels. They also talked about changing the laws to make sure their community had access to resources that would improve the living conditions. This is how I introduced the concept of an *issue*, things we fight for in society that impact our lives, which we can change using our voices and actions. When I asked if they knew what an issue was, no one answered. But when I asked about the concerns they had as community members, they understood that those ideas they had about fixing the climate crisis and homeless epidemic were the *issues* they face in the South Bronx. I then challenged the students and mentors to work together and create a Hip Hop beat. The mentors highlighted classic Hip Hop characteristics like 808s and kick drums while bringing up the political importance of rap as commentary on important issues.

In the Bronx, 44 percent of the population is Black and 56 percent is Latinx.<sup>8</sup> With a population of 1.43 million, the poverty rate is 29.7 percent.<sup>9</sup> The opioid crisis has disproportionately impacted the Bronx, with Bronx Borough President Ruben Diaz Jr. testifying that, “the ravages of this epidemic have been harming the low-income communities of color in the South Bronx for many years. In 2017, the South Bronx had a higher overdose rate than in 49 out of 50 states.” A

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<sup>8</sup> “U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: Bronx County (Bronx Borough), New York.”

<sup>9</sup> “Bronx County, NY.” *Data USA*, [datausa.io/profile/geo/bronx-county-ny](https://datausa.io/profile/geo/bronx-county-ny).

serious factor among youth, “pregnancy and abortion rates among Bronx teens, ages 15 to 19, is the highest in the city,” according to the NY Daily News.<sup>10</sup> Downbeat Collective is not only a response to the students falling through the cracks of public school but is a response to the disproportionate rates of gun violence, addiction, asthma,<sup>11</sup> high school dropouts,<sup>12</sup> poverty and homelessness that these children live amongst in the borough.



The Downbeat Collective students are naturally gifted and motivated when making music. Music mentor Feed the Mind noted that Destiny, one of his mentees, sounded like Notorious B.I.G when she recorded the first take of a rap she wrote. All the mentees naturally gravitated toward their mentors and worked with them every Friday, making beats, writing lyrics, and practicing delivery. At the end of every session, the small groups had produced nearly complete songs and were full of pride. When their parents came to pick them up, the students eagerly showed them what they had produced. It has been extremely rewarding to pick up the students from their classes every week and be greeted with bear hugs and bursting excitement about it being Friday once again. They are proud and see themselves as creatives ready to develop their crafts of singing, dancing, and expressing their budding ideas.

On our third Friday we focused on sharing our goals and exploring what the students needed from their collective in order to achieve them. One of our students, Star, had the goal of being a “singer and set new goals each day and to go with the flow and to be on [her] best

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<sup>10</sup> Cunningham, Jennifer H. “Pregnancy and Abortion Rates among Bronx Teens Is Highest in the City, New Report Says.” *Nydailynews.com*, New York Daily News, 9 Jan. 2019

<sup>11</sup> Maantay, Juliana 2005. “Asthma and Air Pollution in the Bronx: Methodological and Data Considerations in Using GIS for Environmental Justice and Health Research.” doi:10.1016/j.healthplace.2005.09.009.

<sup>12</sup> “A Closer Look at Graduation Rates.” *A Multilingual News Site*, [bronxjournal.com/?p=22462](http://bronxjournal.com/?p=22462).

behavior,” while noting that “one thing that [she] need[s] help with [is]... to work together so we can get things done faster.” Another student, Jay, responded with the question of the day by saying, “what I want to do is to have fun and I want to become famous. What I need for that is some ideas to make songs with it.” An older student, Sheeba, shared that what she needed from her team to achieve her goals of dancing and beatboxing was “good and true feedback.”

*Destiny: My goals are to finish songs and achieve finishing songs that would be actually good and become a better singer and what I want from my team is help me be more confident.*

*Santana: Do you have an example? Like how could I help you be more confident?*

*Destiny: I would like to be more open by being around people that are like me and the friends that I have.<sup>13</sup>*

On the fourth Friday, we started the community discussion with what the students had learned while being a part of the Collective thus far. Renae, a passionate student who has worked with Downbeat Collective music mentor Muso every week of the program, responded by saying she learned that “it doesn’t take much to make music and you can create anything out of nothing.” Participants were excited to share that they learned about different technical aspects of music, but more excited that they could express themselves creatively with dedication and a few tools. One of our regular students, Jessica, started a couple weeks into the program because of her teacher’s concern about her behavioral challenges and capacity to focus. Her first day was February 14th and together we wrote lyrics to a song of hers called *Valentine's Party Song*. She then created a

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<sup>13</sup> Hall, Trinity. Group Interview. 21 Feb. 2020.

jazzy beat with Muso. She performed the song in front of the volunteers and even created a dance. Being able to prove to her teacher that she could handle the program was a success, not only for her but for me as well, because I want to prove Downbeat Collective is for all students, regardless of their perceived limitations.

I did not want our program to replicate the rigid school systems the students are discontent with. I wanted to highlight their strengths the entire time and aid them in feeling good about the time they were investing in the program. In the traditional classroom, the “banking” concept of education can suppress diversity and control student outcomes. Freire criticizes this method in which “superior” teachers deposit lifeless information into the “empty” minds of the “inferior” students (72). Freire highlights the *problem-posing concept* in which all present are both student *and* teacher, eliminating the hierarchy, and allowing for a “mutable process” where all teach and learn, where all are shaped and shaping others.

Dialogue is key to becoming more fully human as Freire claims is our task. We must have free-flowing ideas in an inclusive space where there are no right answers, only ideas that provide opportunities to create solutions collectively. The problem posing method approaches the classroom as a space full of individuals with the ability to critically think and draw meaning from their own experiences. There is an understanding in the space that the collective reality is shared, shaped, and expanded as the classroom’s awareness increases. The goal in this classroom is to deconstruct, through critical thinking, the hierarchies and myths spewed in oppression.

*Patience* was a potent lesson when reflecting on the fifth week in regard to Freire’s problem posing method. In celebration of women’s history month, we talked about women in music and discussed the terms marginalization, suppression, oppression, representation, and intersectionality. I asked the students to read the words, find out how many syllables were in them, and based on the definition and my questions find out how they saw these words appear in their lives. They

started strong though lost focus often. Their natural distraction was coupled with the several kids from the larger ESH program floating in and out while asking to sit in on the program and eat goldfish. I learned that students need a majority of the “instructional” time and lesson plan to be centered on *their* sharing. When focused on “getting through” the lesson, I lost the students in engagement. I have more of a sense of how much theory they can handle in relation to time they work in their small groups or develop themselves as artists through intriguing questions and music. A great example of when this worked was when we practiced melodies by analyzing three poems/songs: “The Rose that Grew from the Concrete” by Tupac Shakur, “Still I Rise by Maya Angelou”, and “Mad” by Solange. The students took turns reading the pieces multiple times, with time for group analysis of what we thought the lyricists meant in between. Finally, after demonstrating, I asked the students to find one or two lines from one of the pieces and sing aloud a melody they thought sounded good. Most of the students went and it proved to be helpful in building their confidence to have them sing it again and again until their voice lost its shake and they felt comfortable in the flow. It was an especially useful exercise in teaching melodies. After, I probed the small groups to create a song with at least a solid melody for a hook or verse. The groups delivered and worked toward the goal of getting ideas started, writing lyrics to sing, and completing songs in their small groups.



## **Week 2 - USING ART AS ACTIVISM TO RECLAIM OUR SPACES AND SOUND**

**Learning Outcomes: Students will...**

- Explore the meaning terms activism, movement, issue...|
- Gain insight into the history of hip hop in the Bronx and how music serves in movement building for collective as well as personal liberation.

### **I. Pre-Set Up**

- + Equip the rooms with equipment and assign mentors/volunteers to a space, set up snacks and conversation circles in the multipurpose room, put necessary papers in folders and lay out folders/notebooks/writing utensils to pick up.

### **II. Check In (10 minutes)**

- + Students are signed in, materials are distributed to them near the entrance, they are ushered into the community room where there's a free write prompt on the board as well as the day's agenda. They can take their seats and start the prompt immediately or they can converse and start with snacks.
- + <GO OVER AGENDA FOR THE DAY>

### **III. Theme of the Week Workshop (45 minutes)**

- + Question of the Day: If you had a billion dollars, what would you do to improve your community? Why? How do you think you could do it?
- + Share Out/Introducing the Issue: *Not everyone has to share, there is no rule that says you have to share but I think an important part of making music and exploring yourself as an artist involves sharing your story and thoughts. This is a safe space, the stakes are very low so we can feel free to be ourselves.*

Figure 1: Weekly Agenda

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Downbeat Collective mentors and I had to make the tough but undeniably necessary call to postpone programming. On Friday, March 13th we had our

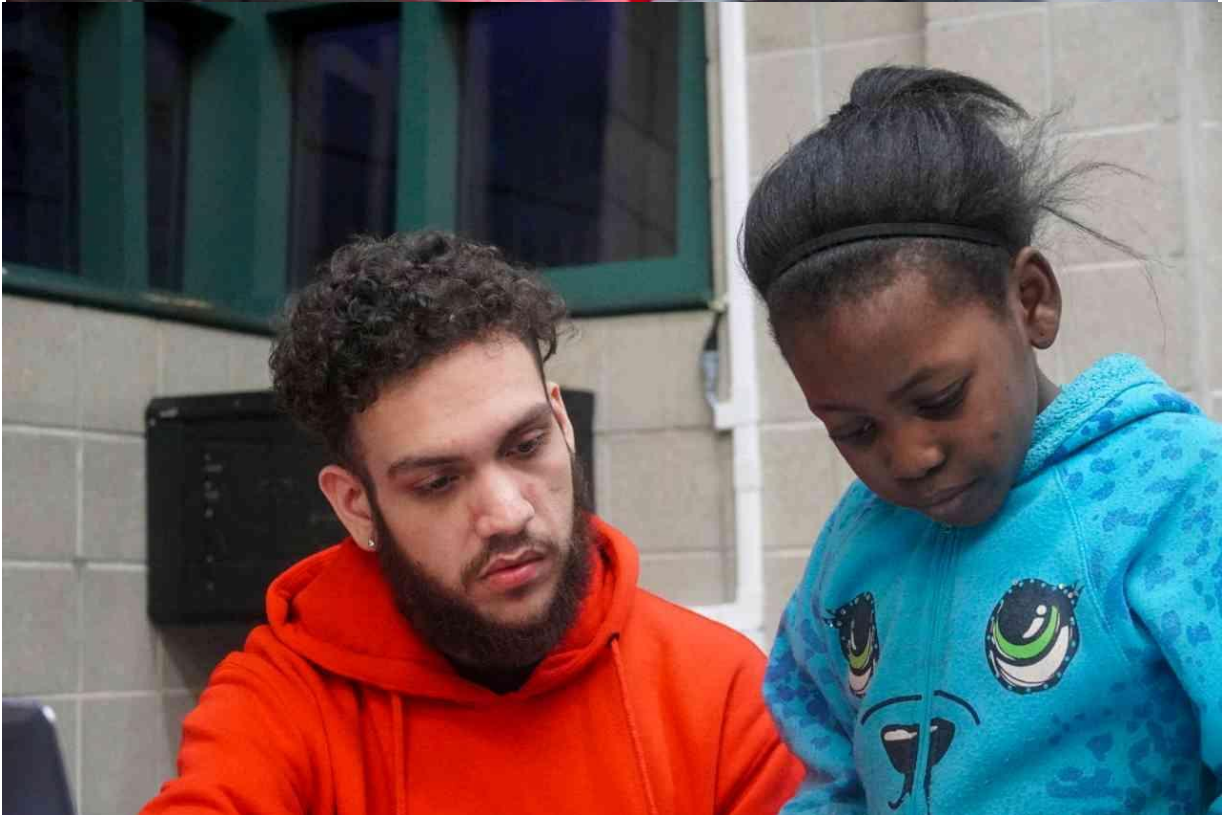
last day of programming for the foreseeable future and, in order to keep everyone safe, we practiced physically distancing ourselves and did not bring music equipment. Instead, I and two mentors facilitated a conversation with the students about their understanding, thoughts, and feelings about Coronavirus. Several had difficulty understanding the issue, although their school had been shut down due to confirmed cases in the building. We talked about inequality as public schools remained open while private schools closed immediately. Students were able to share their disbelief, questions, and frustration with how the issue was being dealt with by our leaders. Before we closed out we brainstormed ways to continue making music and practicing good musicianship skills while quarantined. We also brainstormed ways to keep ourselves physically and mentally safe during this trying time. Finally, we took a group photo and left after connecting with a few parents about continuing programming in the future. The students were rightfully upset about not being able to make music and the programming being cancelled. While the spring pilot program has been put on pause, I reassured the students that we will always be a community and therefore, we won't be gone for long. I plan to return to East Side House community center and the Downbeat cohort to finish the last five weeks of programming, including recording music to create a mixtape with and inviting parents to watch a performance.

Downbeat Collective has been a labor of unfettered love. It has been my commitment not only to the community that birthed Hip Hop but to myself as an artist, educator, activist, and lifelong learner. The students brought so much joy and taught our team so much, made apparent during our weekly debriefs at the end of each Friday. We saw so much of our heroes and ourselves in the young people who stepped up and embraced us in full excitement and vulnerability. I learned that all I can do is breathe, practice active listening and patience, remember the true goal is to spend intentional time in community, and let go of the fear of "getting it right." There would be nights when I boarded the time machine that is my mind and reflected on every moment I could

have done better, been more gentle, and responded like more of a leader. But in reflection on those paralyzing nights, I realize there is no such thing. As an educator, I felt myself easily slip into the paradigms of hierarchy, perfection, and guilt. As adults, it is easy to get caught up in our conditioning. We often get stuck in the past when working with our future generations. I could have lived more fully in the truth that is so apparent to children: They are free, they are entitled to their freedom, and they are unafraid to express themselves. They taught us as much as we taught them, and in reflection, I'm still learning. I thank them for their humor, their energy, their openness, their patience, their willingness, and their love. The hugs and smiles I was ambushed with upon entering East Side House Community Center will not be forgotten and the students who gave us a chance to learn alongside them are deeply missed.



































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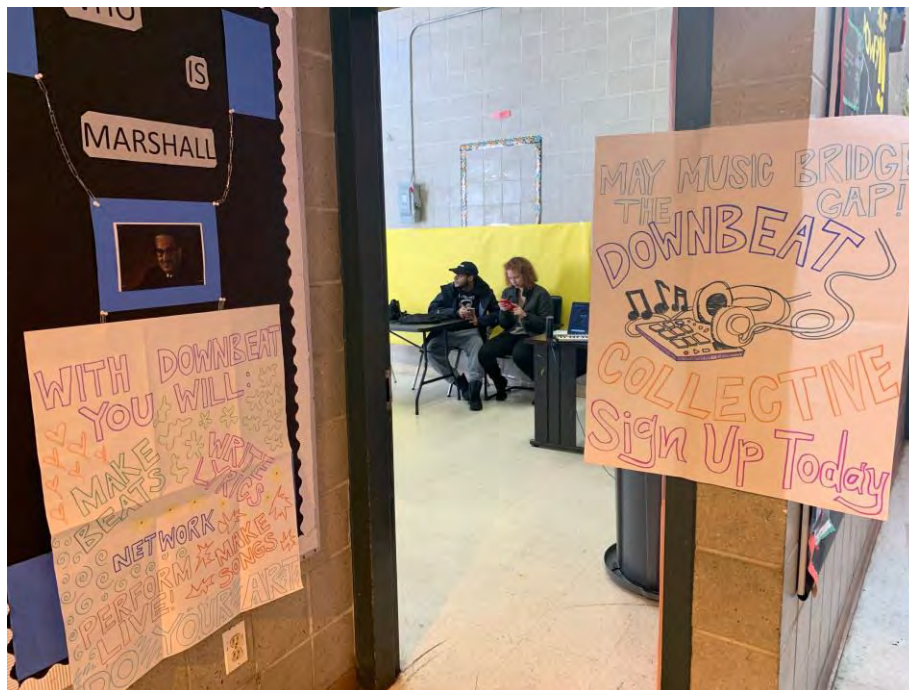
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This solution is not (nor can it be) found in the banking concept. On the contrary, banking education maintains and even stimulates the contradiction through the following attitudes and practices, which mirror oppressive society as a whole:

- (a) the teacher teaches and the students are taught;
- (b) the teacher knows everything and the students know nothing;
- (c) the teacher thinks and the students are thought about;
- (d) the teacher talks and the students listen—meekly;
- (e) the teacher disciplines and the students are disciplined;
- (f) the teacher chooses and enforces his choice, and the students comply;
- (g) the teacher acts and the students have the illusion of acting through the action of the teacher;
- (h) the teacher chooses the program content, and the students (who were not consulted) adapt to it;
- (i) the teacher confuses the authority of knowledge with his or her own professional authority, which she and he sets in opposition to the freedom of the students;
- (j) the teacher is the Subject of the learning process, while the pupils are mere objects.

*The characteristics of the Banking Concept of Education according to Paulo Freire (1970)*













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