



Detroit Youth Speak Back: Rewriting Deficit Perspectives Through Songwriting

1. What is the research about?

Educators and society often view racialized urban youth through a *deficit framework* – locating ‘problems’ in youth themselves, rather than recognizing the structural and systemic forces that shape young people’s lives. This article explores how songwriting may allow youth to “write back” to these narratives by creating powerful counterstories.

The author draws on data from an after-school music program to explore the potential benefits of carefully facilitated songwriting experiences.

2. Where did the research take place?

The research took place at Michigan State University’s Community Music School in Detroit.

3. Who is this research about?

This research is about youth in a community-based songwriting class. Participants were aged 9-15 and attended Detroit public or charter schools. The majority were Black.

4. How was the research done?

Researchers used critical ethnographic methods to examine young people’s experiences in The Verses Project, a 15-week, community-based, after-school songwriting class. The program was facilitated by four local teaching artists and three mentors. Out of the initial cohort of 26 youth, 24 completed the program.

Data was drawn from observations, field notes from curriculum-planning meetings, three semi-structured focus groups with youth, 30 student-produced artifacts, and 15 researcher memos.

“Framing youth’s work in a community music songwriting context as counterstory offers a powerful rationale for a paradigm shift in music education to prioritize carefully facilitated songwriting programs” (p. 23).

5. What are the key findings?

Drawing on young people’s experiences in The Verses Project, the study outlines **three potential benefits** of participating in a carefully facilitated songwriting program:

- a) By sharing their stories on their own terms, young people can **subvert deficit perspectives that frame their lives**.
- b) Facilitators can support youth in **recognizing and addressing the systemic and structural forces that affect them**.
- c) Facilitators can encourage youth to **value their own voice and artistry**, and **assert their presence** in their communities.

6. Why does it matter for youth work?

This study shows that youth can benefit from carefully facilitated, strengths-based songwriting programs. These opportunities may allow youth to tell their own stories, and challenge negative perceptions of their communities.

The author notes that it is crucial for facilitators to take a **strengths-based approach** in order to avoid reproducing deficit-based narratives.

Educators should also use **culturally-relevant pedagogy** and **centre young people’s musical interests** (e.g., by incorporating genres that resonate with their lived experiences).



Hess, J. (2018). Detroit youth speak back: Rewriting deficit perspectives through songwriting. *Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education*, 216, 7-30.