

Is Hip Hop Education Another Hustle? The (Ir)Responsible Use of Hip Hop as Pedagogy

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Abstract:

Efforts have been made to incorporate rap lyrics and hip hop culture into K-12 schooling. Proponents claim that hip hop-based education (HHBE) will (re)engage urban and “at-risk” youth and increase academic achievement. However, there is a lack of consensus on the meaning, purpose, or efficacy of hip hop as education. This chapter interrogates the conceptualization and social implications of HHBE in American public schools. We offer an interpretative review of supplementary hip hop programs, national campaigns, educational products, and not-for-profit organizations. Based on our review, we propose seven guiding questions that may help educators use hip hop in a responsible manner.

Introduction

American schools are now incorporating beats, rhymes, Jay-Z, and freestyle cyphers in their curriculum and afterschool activities. Proponents of hip hop-based education (HHBE) argue that hip hop can help reform urban schools, improve student-teacher relationships, prevent alienation from schooling practices, enrich school climate, and promote literacy (e.g., Campbell, 2005; Dimitriadis, 2001; Ginwright, 2004; Hill, 2009). Furthermore, rap lyric discourse analysis might comprise the basis for a “critical pedagogical” framework for the empowering of oppressed black and Latina students (Parmar, 2009). In this chapter, we examine the elements of the HHBE movement. According to our findings, the HHBE movement has produced a vibrant eco-sphere of supplementary hip hop programs, national campaigns, educational products, and not-for-profit organizations to address the issue of “urban” and “at-risk” youth underachievement.

While Hip Hop education may sound like an exciting innovation, doubtful critics remain unconvinced and describe HHBE as an intellectually bankrupt movement that promotes oppositional culture and criminal activity over educational excellence (Malkin, 2004; Mac Donald, 1998; McWhorter, 2008). Our discussion follows two threads of inquiry: Is hip hop education just another hustle?¹ If not, how can educators use hip hop in a responsible manner? The overall goal of this chapter is to raise inconvenient questions regarding social responsibility,

¹ By hustle, we mean a clever distraction from the structural sources of both school failure and success, such as segregated “apartheid” schools, the school-to-prison pipeline, or the increasing corporatization and privatization of schooling. Most hip hop educators are not literally hustlers; we suspect that most possess a sincere dedication to the well-being of students. Our critique is not about the motivations of individual teachers or leaders of hip hop organizations. Likewise, our focus is not on the causal, empirical effect of these interventions on student outcomes.

which require answers from a shared philosophical foundation. What is the source of legitimate expertise for hip hop educators? What systems are in place to prevent the misappropriation (e.g. tracking, acculturation, and exclusion) of the culture of youth? And, will hip hop pedagogy be used to reform or re-enforce the “hidden” culture of power in the classroom and existing norms of schooling?

Our discussion is substantiated by the evaluation of publicly available HHBE resources including curriculum course packets, websites, posted videos, blogs, books, peer-reviewed journal articles and study guides. To help establish the shared philosophical foundation for hip hop education discourse, we propose the following conceptualization of hip hop education and seven areas of inquiry.

What is Hip Hop Education or Rap Pedagogy?

While professional educators describe hip hop an innovative direction in schooling, hip-hop-as-education is by no means a “new” phenomenon. As evidenced by Afrika Bambaataa and the Zulu Nation, KRS-One, and Public Enemy, the hip hop intelligentsia of the 1980s and 1990s has used hip hop as a platform for instruction in history, spirituality, and black power politics for over three decades (Harris, 2005; Keyes, 2002). However, recent HHBE proponents appear to be forwarding a much more formalized and structured approach to education—one similar to that found in the hip hop studies movement in the academy--than their pioneering predecessors.

But what, exactly, is hip hop education or rap pedagogy? What makes hip hop educational? Does hip hop education mean teaching hip hop practices, such as how to rap or breakdance? Or is it the use of rap lyrics and anecdotes as texts to teach traditional curriculum subjects (e.g. reading, science, history)? With aspirations for long-term positioning in K-12

public schools, part of the legitimating process for HHBE will require suitable answers to these questions. However, despite the excitement surrounding hip hop education, the substantive, methodological, and theoretical boundaries of HHBE are not clear.

For example, in our review of books, articles, and essays, we found an ambiguity in the terminology used to describe the use of hip hop in schools.² Academic authors appear to be partial to the nomenclature “hip hop based education” (herein, HHBE, i.e., Petchauer, 2009; Hill, 2009). Simply stated, HHBE refers to the use of hip hop elements as curricular and pedagogical resources.

Across several programs, we’ve found *Hip Hop Curricula* to be heavily rap centric, with an emphasis on the inclusion of rap music and lyrical analysis to aid student learning. While, on the other hand, *Hip Hop Pedagogy*, typically refers to the applications of teaching styles and classroom strategies that enhance both the “critical-ness” and “cultural relevance” of schooling with a social justice perspective (i.e., Petchaeur 2009, Dimitriadis, 2001; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2005; Hill, 2009; Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2002; Stovall, 2006).

In *Critical Hip Hop Pedagogy*, hip hop is used to make black and Latina students *and* teachers feel empowered by the schooling process in three distinct ways. By way of Paulo Freire, there is a deliberate emphasis on developing student’s critical thinking skills through active exchange and discussion, instead of the passive transmission of information. Second, critical HHBE pedagogy stresses the use of non-traditional texts in the classroom (e.g. rap videos, movies, etc.) to have students critique and question (“deconstruct”) the veracity of dominant texts. Likewise, indigenous meaning and heritage are elevated as legitimate forms of knowledge

² Academic databases (e.g., ArticleFirst) and publicly available search engines (e.g., Google Scholar) yield fewer than 30 peer-reviewed works on hip hop education or rap pedagogy.

rather than expert (read: white-privileged) culture. Third, in challenging the process of traditional schooling as individual competition for scarce socioeconomics, critical hip hop pedagogy makes schooling “emancipatory” for historically oppressed groups in society through a social justice framework.

Similarly, *Cultural Relevant Hip Hop Pedagogy* seeks to breakdown the hierarchal structure of knowledge and subject matter. With its emphasis on the contemporary, this approach challenges the assumption that adults are the sole source of important information. The HHBE literature promotes using classroom strategies that rely on the incorporation of knowledge from the social worlds of youth. Therefore, in decreasing the social distance between school adults and children, by way of Vygotsky’s theory of learning, teachers are expected to work collaboratively to co-construct cultural relevant knowledge. For example, Marcella Runell and Martha Diaz’s *Hip Hop Education Guidebook* (2007) suggests that high school students can learn about the process of tracing African ancestry through DNA, as well as through historical and cultural artifacts. With this interdisciplinary lesson (World History, Science, Language Arts, and Geography), students and teachers can learn about the global significance of African ancestry to hip hop culture.

Enhancing cultural relevance is more than just making school fun interesting; it’s the restructuring of the politics of the classroom (Hill, 2009; Emdin, 2010) to facilitate more productive (or at least less hostile) relationships with students (Stovall, 2006). The need for culturally relevant and critical pedagogy is predicated on the assumption that the troubles of minority students can be attributed to culture and identity. The literature links underachievement to a “cultural mismatch” between student and school culture, and “cultural conflict.” The latter refers to a purposeful devaluing of youth culture by schools, and/or an oppositional resistance on

the part of minority students. As such, the call for HHBE is usually based on the need to improve school climate (“you are welcome here” and “your culture is valued here”). The response to that call has resulted in a diverse eco-sphere of HHBE.

In our review, we found it useful to view HHBE as an amalgamation of four interconnected areas: (a) supplementary hip hop programs, (b) national hip hop education campaigns, (c) hip hop education products, and (d) not-for-profit organizations.

Supplementary Hip Hop Education Programs include afterschool instruction, learning programs at community centers, and summer camps. For example, the Progressive Arts Alliance in Cleveland, OH sponsors *The Rhapsody Program*, a hip hop afterschool program and two-week summer camp. The program offers instruction in the hip hop arts, including turntablism, graffiti, dance, and lyricism. Similarly, *The Underground Railroad Program* at the Mandela Art Center in Oakland, CA is hip hop arts academy focused on rap music and spoken word. These supplementary programs can be found in cities around the country. The programs require no restructuring or challenging of school-building learning. Because they are not classroom-based, emphasis is placed on promoting self-efficacy through hip hop’s performative elements, rather than directly improving education outcomes. In addition to promoting self-efficacy, supplementary hip hop programs keep youth off the streets and engaged in educational activities. Thus, they function to prevent the out-of-school causes of the learning gaps found in these populations.

National Hip Hop Education Campaigns link high profile celebrities and rappers, public intellectuals, charitable foundations, and politicians in efforts to address the schooling troubles of urban youth. *The Get Schooled Campaign (2010)*, for example brings celebrities to cities on a national bus tour to engage local youth in serious conversation about education. It was

developed in partnership with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and aims to “connect, inspire and mobilize people to work harder to increase high school and college graduation rates, improve post-secondary readiness and promote the fundamental importance of education.”

Another example is *The Urban Leaguer Def Jam Reader Program*, launched by Russell Simmon’s Hip-Hop Summit Action Network (HSAN) and National Urban League. The program enlisted rappers to boost literacy among urban youth. The campaign promoted community group reads of books, hip hop song lyrics, and movie scripts.

Hip Hop Education Products comprise the most visible and fastest growing aspect of HHBE. Indeed, in our review of HHBE, we were surprised by the sheer volume of for-profit, commercial hip hop education products now on the market. The movement has produced an industry of hip hop-related products including study guides, curriculum packets, educational music CDs, test-prep flash cards, children’s videos, hip hop themed children’s books, and web-based learning tools. In addition, teachers and schools can purchase a wide-variety of paid learning services from hip hop education consultants/ “experts” or participate in training workshops or professional development retreats.

Last, *Not-For-Profit Organizations* are involved in the movement. Community-based, educational organizations include the *Hip Hop Association* (H2A, H2Ed), *Guerilla Arts Ink*, *International Association of Hip Hop Education* (IAHHE), *Hip Hop Education* (HHE), *Hip Hop Caucus Education Fund*, *The Hip Hop Congress*, and *Hip Hop 4 Life*. These organizations regularly partner with local school districts to institute hip hop arts programs in schools and to develop hip hop themed curriculum.

Dilemmas of a Hip Hop Educator

Making hip hop an empowering experience for students is not going to be easy. The formal use of hip hop in K-12 schooling raises some serious concerns about power and identity in the classroom. Educators seeking to bring rap lyrics and HHBE practices in the classroom need to (re)consider the potential pitfalls and limitations of this strategy. As a starting place for encouraging the responsible use of hip hop in schools, we propose that HHBE practitioners self-reflectively think about the following seven areas of inquiry:

- (1) The Question of Expertise and Authority*
- (2) HHBE As Cultural Theft and (Mis)Appropriation*
- (3) The Value of Hip Hop Education for Future Success*
- (4) The Elusiveness of Hip Hop Culture*
- (5) Homogenizing Youth Identity and Expression*
- (6) The Problem of Famous Rappers and Celebrity Culture*
- (7) Getting Real about Hip Hop and Schooling*

1. The Question of Expertise and Authority

How am I qualified to incorporate hip hop in my teaching?

The translation of youth or street-born culture into schooling is likely to antagonize tensions over interpretative authority and expertise. What qualifies a school teacher to critique hip hop culture, or to command a classroom discussion about graffiti? What segment of America's teaching core is prepared to deconstruct Rakim's flow and juxtapose that with the lyrical dexterity of Wacka Flocka Flame? HHBE can unfairly place the burden of prerequisite knowledge on the shoulders of students by assuming that they possess a basic skill-set *and* desire to teach school adults about

hip hop. We wonder how many young people are familiar with hip hop beyond the easily consumable images provided by the corporate rap music industry. Schools can outsource some HHBE programs to private consultants (at a price), non-profit organizations, and the occasional national initiative. However, the long-term sustainability and stated goals of the movement requires everyday engagement with hip hop by school-based teachers.

Unlike the teacher certification and graduate degree programs for those wishing to teach sixth grade science, no comparable gatekeeping mechanism exists for hip hop educators. While hip hop practitioners engage in an informal vetting process with every performance for their community (online or otherwise), the flaws of this unstructured system has been blamed for the perceived de-skilling of the hip hop artist and is hardly conducive to the standardized evaluation appreciated by parents and teachers. The norms, standards, and accountability developed in systematic teacher training form the basis of legitimate expertise in the teaching profession. It also undergirds the social contract between parents and schools: parents need to trust that the strangers in charge of their children for eight hours a day possess some minimal competency. Currently, there is no screening process, or preparation system to guarantee that those marketed as hip hop educators or “experts” know anything about education *or* hip hop.

Many hip hop educators appear, at best, disciplinarians trained in traditional academic departments, such as English. A four-year degree in literature, and a love of hip hop, does not necessarily prepare one for engagement in rap. Colleges have spotty track records for creating research and knowledge about racial minorities and the poor. Therefore, as a result, some hip hop educators may reproduce the culture-of-poverty, deficit modeling in their approach to hip hop in the classroom. Unfortunately, much of the hip hop studies literature used in college-level courses treats hip hop culture as a “social problem” rife with nihilistic violence, materialism,

homophobia, sexism, and anti-intellectualism. Likely, this is not the kind of sensibilities we want hip hop educators to bring into the classroom.

2. HHBE As Cultural Theft and (Mis)Appropriation

What is my connection to hip hop and am I just exploiting it for my own interests?

To the extent that schooling is synonymous with white schooling, hip hop interventions can get interpreted as “white people stealing black culture.” In his book *Everything But the Burden* (2003), Greg Tate asserts that white society has attempted to steal and corrupt every expression of black youth culture since Jazz, The Blues, and Rock N’ Roll. In this view, hip hop education might be the latest case of grand-theft-ethos, the cultural theft and the misappropriation of blackness. Some educators may disagree that culture can “belong” to any one group, or quibble with the “blackness” of hip hop given its multi-ethnic history. However, responsible hip hop educators should at least be aware that the use of hip hop by institutions, especially those efforts directed by white people, may activate a long history of distrust. This point was made recently by Ayanna Brown (2005) at a National Council of Teachers national convention. Questioning the motives and purpose of hip hop education, she asked “are we appreciating [hip hop] culture, or raping rap?”

Teachers may not have a legitimate right use the cultural expressions, language, and images of hip hop culture to pursue the interests of their institution. Schools lack the cultural capital embedded in the racial and social class origins of hip hop culture. More, school adults typically lack the “street consciousness” or “hood authenticity” that is often imagined as hip hop’s countercultural ethos. Schools represent the status-quo, while hip hop—to the extent that it represents counter-hegemonic, youth culture—opposes the goals of schooling. This cultural

mis-alignment can raise suspicions about the “true” motives of educators. Are schools just exploiting hip hop to boost test scores? Do hip hop educators have any meaningful connections to hip hop communities, specifically, black and brown communities?

The desire to incorporate hip hop into formal schooling has resulted in, at times, heated debates between educators and those in the “hip hop community.” In 2006, KRS-One threatened a roundtable panelist at the Stanford University Hip Hop “Know-The-Ledge” conference.³ As an example of ill-will and suspicion revolving around formal hip hop education, KRS-One argued that the so-called hip hop experts had no right to discuss hip hop until they mastered one of the performative aesthetics of the culture. In addition, he questioned whether middle- and upper-class spaces, removed from the streets and the criminal justice system, could harbor an authentic expression of hip hop culture. At a UC-Berkeley Hip Hop Studies meeting in 2006, respected hip hop historian Davey D pointed to the opportunism developing in hip hop education:

Now it's like everybody is dealing in hip-hop, but they have nothing to do or no connection with the culture at all....You have an interesting phenomenon, where the 'hip-hop experts,' with university appointments attached to their name, have no credibility whatsoever in hip-hop circles. That, coupled with the fact that academia in a lot of places has always kept a distinct separation between what goes on in community and what happens on campus, is a source of tension. (as quoted in Harmanci, 2007)

³ Another well-known example is the conflict between Michael Eric Dyson and former Death Row Records CEO and real-life gangster Suge Knight. The two mixed words over whether the professor had the authority to write about the life of late rapper Tupac/2pac Shakur in the book *Holler if You Hear Me*.

Davey D was referring explicitly to higher education, but we could replace “campus” and “academia” with “school building.” The K-12 teaching core is typically middle-class, white, and old. Is it reasonable to expect that they can be “part of the culture?” The obsession with authenticity and mainstream profitability has defined the irony of hip hop for decades. As such, race and social class dynamics can lead to the conclusion that hip hop educators are hustlers seeking to exploit the culture for their own benefit.

3. The Value of Hip Hop Education for Future Success

How will my hip hop curriculum prepare students for future success?

Hip hop might make schooling more relevant and enjoyable, but the value of such an educational experience may have little currency in the labor market or higher education. As education theorists have conceded for some time, schooling is not just about transmitting explicit lessons and skills. The “hidden curriculum” of schooling involves preparing students to conform to preexisting racial, social class, and gendered roles in a stratified and unequal society. In order to preserve the status hierarchy, schools reward the cultural performances of the children of the advantaged, while labeling the cultural styles and heritages of other youth as deviant and undesirable (Lareau, 2003). In some cases, schools have engaged in the explicit destruction of minority culture, community ties, language, and fashion as *official* policy (e.g., Carnoy, 1974; Valenzuela, 1999). We like the idea of rewarding the cultural repertoires of disadvantaged students in schools, but educators should consider both the *exchange value* and *use-value* of HHBE given these latent functions of schooling.

For example, imagine the exchange value of an English course entitled, “The Lyrics of Lil’ Wayne 101” for high school students in urban, high poverty school districts. Let us assume

that the hypothetical course is a success: it is culturally relevant, motivates students, standardized reading scores increase a bit, and most urban schools around the country adopt the course. But what about the exchange value of this course for college-going or employment? While affluent schools have the resources to pay hip hop consultants, purchase the training manuals, and hire Lil' Wayne as a guest lecturer in the music department, other less affluent schools are faced with the decision of investing in culturally relevant courses *or* college-prep courses. College admission officers review student transcripts to determine college-readiness and an "A" in Lil' Wayne 101 may not signify as much of an accomplishment as a "B" in AP Shakespearean Literature. Therefore, ghettoization of black students, or a de-facto "tracking in" or "tracking out" of students can occur when hip hop is used in K-12 schools.⁴

In practice, HHBE tends to focus on our nation's most vulnerable students. Still, the use-value of hip hop is undermined by the cultural repertoires associated with commercial rap since the gangsta turn in the mid-1990s. A successful hip hop curriculum will have to involve (re)assuring parents, teachers, and future employers that "keeping it real"—certain modes of appropriate deportment, (fashion) styles, expression, and language use—will not interfere with developing the "soft skills" necessary to navigate hostile work environments where cultural difference is read as deficiency. Young people are savvy, and many already know when to code switch away from baggy pants and slang. But, as the documentary *The Hip Hop Project* (2006) shows, HHBE programs can lead to black male students in particular believing that the hip hop

⁴ In the education literature, this is usually referred to as "Effectively maintained inequality" (EMI). Simply put: the expansion of education opportunities and experiences can lead to a saturation of poor, minority, or gay students in stigmatized courses or tracks like hip hop education, while privileged students are guided towards a more "cultured" curriculum.

industry offers a viable career path. In the film, struggling urban youth find their voice and passion, as well as mentorship and support, in a hip hop after-school program. However, some of the youth begin to turn-away from schooling to pursue their dreams as rappers. The responsible educator must find ways to connect hip hop to concrete skills and opportunities in the labor market.

4. The Elusiveness of Hip Hop Culture

What interpretations of “hip hop” will be endorsed in my program?

Hip Hop educators want to disrupt the identity performances valued in white schooling. Likewise, we support the idea of using hip hop to decenter certain ways of dressing, acting, and speaking as normal and appropriate. In theory, a classroom setting that respects the cultural history of students and sees community dialect as a resource, not as a barrier to learning, seems important. Yet, educators should exercise caution about the types of identity performances associated with “hip hop culture.” Whose definitions of hip hop are being endorsed? Educators should note that cultural expressions are fleeting and disputed within the world of hip hop. The elusive and divisive construction of authentic identity makes it difficult to meld hip hop approaches with pedagogy. Part of “keeping it real” means that even the most dedicated adherent of hip hop can be snubbed as a “faker,” “wankster,” or “window shopper.” Hip Hop involves the constant surveillance of language, dress, and style. Are teachers ready for the possible confrontations over wearing pants that are at once “too baggy” and “too tight?” By the time teachers master the appropriate use of “bling bling” or “swagger” in a sentence, the lingo is likely to be deemed “wack” or “played out.”

Some school adults can spot the cultural distinctions between the “Goth Rocker” and the “Hip Hop Gangsta” cliques in the lunchroom. The identity politics within and between *hip hop cultures*, plural, are harder to pin down. Importantly, the styles and expressions that distinguish hip hop sects are highly circumscribed by race, social class, gender, and sexual orientation. For example, appropriate dress in the NerdCore (popular among suburban, affluent, white kids) and HorrorCore (popular among poor white kids) hip hop movements are conflicting, even though both cater to mostly white youth. NeoSoul, AfroPunk, Hyphy, Go-Go (mostly found in DC), HomoHop, Bounce (New Orleans), and Bohemian Spoken Word are just a few possible subcultures today. Our point is that, instead of unifying a classroom around a common cultural experience, hip hop can also aggravate differences between various hip hop subcultures.

5. Homogenizing Youth Identity and Expression

Will my use of hip hop place arbitrary limits on youth culture?

The responsible use of hip hop-based education must address historic and contemporary politics of identity, including race, social economics, and gender/sexuality. We are especially concerned that popular notions of hip hop culture place arbitrary limits on student identity, and could create a “stereotype threat” in schools. There is a tendency to read all youth culture as hip hop, particularly to project the “hip hop generation” moniker onto the masses of black and brown youth born after 1965. Applying the hip hop identity onto students can homogenize the diversity of ideas, aspirations, and worldviews that they feel comfortable expressing. By relying on hip hop culture in the classroom, teachers can inadvertently (re)produce a captive consumer-base by associating intelligence and appropriate behavior with consumption of mass-produced, lifestyle products sold by corporations.

Teachers can easily conflate “youth culture,” marketed rap videos and clothes with “the culture of youth,” the ideas and aspirations of young people mediated by everyday experiences. There is an important distinction between the two. As Asante (2008) finds, the everyday struggles of many black youth have nothing to do with rap music. The young people in his study appear to resent the notion that hip hop speaks to or for them. *The Black Youth Project* (2008), (initiated by Kathy Cohen at Chicago University) finds that black youth in particular are highly skeptical of the stereotypical images found in hip hop. They outwardly reject the identities constructed in hip hop as accurate or authentic, especially those gendered portrayals of black boys (thugs and gangsters) and girls (promiscuous gold diggers).

Using hip hop as an indicator of student culture or identity might produce a race-gendered-sexualized *stereotype threat*. Education researchers have documented for more than 25 years that disadvantaged groups can be harmed when stereotypes are mentioned in class. Controlled experiments show that exposure to the stereotype that “blacks are less intelligent” lowers the test scores of black students, while mentioning in class that “women don’t like science” can have the same effect on female students. Johnson, Jackson, & Gatto (1995: 34) find that young, black males who are exposed to hip hop are less optimistic about the usefulness of college education for getting “nice things,” such as cars and clothes, and are more likely to support acquiring possessions through illegal means. Among low income female teens, Wingood et al. (2003) find that black students who watched more than 14 hours of hip hop videos per week were three times more likely to have hit a teacher than those who watched fewer hip hop videos. In light of this research, teachers may want to exercise caution while deconstructing the lyrics of “The Whisper Song (Wait)” (2005) by the Ying Yang Twins or Lil’ Wayne and Drake’s “Gonorrhea” (2010).

In Hollywood movies like *Dangerous Minds* (1995) or *Freedom Writers* (2007), the inclusion of hip hop leads to mutual understanding, increased achievement, and self-confidence. But educators should be warned that the use of one-dimension stereotypes found in mainstream hip hop is likely to insight anger, disengagement, and resistance. In particular, the materials and cultural expectations invoked in mainstream hip hop promote disparaging norms about blacks, women, homosexuals, and the poor. This is beyond the messages about hyper-consumption, individualism, and violence rife in most popular culture, and American culture writ-large.

We suspect that hip hop educators are aware of the these themes and norms in the culture, and therefore play it safe by only referencing the more “positive” or “conscious” artists like Mos Def, Lauryn Hill, or something from the late 1980s. Already, teachers have faced suspension and termination for playing moderately controversial rap songs in class. For example, in Spokane, Washington, a teacher at Shadle Park High School was placed on administrative leave after printing the lyrics to the Blue Scholars song “Commencement Day,” a song critical of the education system (Kauder, 2010). In this climate, teachers will find it difficult to develop a hip hop curriculum that addresses diverse understandings of sexuality, or engages non-centrist politics.

6. The Problem of Famous Rappers and Celebrity Culture

What place do rappers, wealthy celebrities, and corporations have in an empowering pedagogy or curriculum?

A real potential for symbolic violence against student identity can be seen in the promotion of rappers as “role models” and celebrity teachers in troubled schools. Educators might (re)consider whether these characters truly embody the ideals we seek for children. Most rappers, like basketball and football players, have always insisted that they are not positive role

models for other people's children.⁵ As Ice Cube put it sometime ago, "Do I look like a mutha fuckin' role model?/ To a kid lookin' up ta me/ Life ain't nothin but bitches and money" (N.W.A, "Gangsta, Gangsta," *Straight Outta Compton*). Poets, ghetto reporters, hustlers, savvy businessmen—perhaps, but the past (and present) criminal activity and anti-societal leanings professed by many artists seem like a less than ideal archetype for youth.

It has become popular for schools to invite celebrities as guest motivational speakers. Famous rappers are asked to say something positive to the kids: stay away from crime, don't get involved in the drug game, eat your vegetables, stay in school, listen to your teachers and parents, and follow your dreams. After conveying these maxims for success, the events usually include a free concert sponsored by soft drink companies. There is something intuitive, yet sadly ironic about these guest appearances. It is understandable why some teachers may think this is a good idea. Many young people do idolize rappers and celebrity culture. For disadvantage youth in particular, the neighborhood rapper who "made it" might be the only real image of success, besides drug dealers and the one guy who went pro in NBA or NFL. Rappers, then, provide an accessible form of social capital and a blueprint for upward mobility.

However, the logic suggests that students will take to heart the "stay in school message" provided by T.I or rapper Rick Ross. We have to wonder if the reliance on rap celebrities might not be reinforcing the message that inner-city youth have only three options in life: drugs, basketball, or rap. This is a narrow image of the opportunity structure to promote. It limits the

⁵ Two exceptions can be found in hip hop history. The first is the explicitly political, conscious rap of the 1980s and 1990s. Artists deemed themselves educators and potential leaders of the black community. The second can be seen in the politicization of rappers in the 2000, 2004, and 2008 presidential elections. Youth people were supposed to emulate rappers at the voting polls.

potential of youth by associating their identities with occupational activities that are unrealistic, linked to entertainment, and potentially fatal. Whatever positive, abstract message delivered during a 30 minute talk must be weighed against the other concrete messages youth are receiving from the music. The lyrical content of violence, sex, and drugs; the streets-to-rap game life story created by publicists; and the continual real life arrests faced by many artists also provide a powerful message.

Assuming elementary and middle-school students are able to distinguish between the “real lives” of artists and their on-stage personas, rap celebrities might provide a great example in capitalism (“get money,” “money over bitches”), exploitation (“pimpin’ ain’t easy”), and rugged individualism (“do you,” “get yours”). Many commercial artists, like Jay-Z, have mastered the swagger of the old-boys club of monopoly capital. For more than two decades, hip hop has been funded by malt-liquor, champagne, and cognac companies. And this says nothing about the connection between hip hop and strip clubs, the porn industry, fashion sweat-shops, and illegal drug sales. Many parents and educators see these as “all American” norms that should be fought against. Constructing an emancipatory curriculum involving commercial rappers is likely to be a challenge.

7. Getting Real about Hip Hop and Schooling

Am I being realistic about my goals and the limitations of hip hop?

In this final section, we raise some questions about the impact of hip hop education. Our last guiding question asks for a serious and honest assessment about the purpose of HHBE. The programs we have encountered seek to boost test scores and improve other student outcomes. Some efforts aim to improve teacher-student relationships and to produce a more culturally-

sensitive school climate. As such, a program and organization that produces these results should be applauded. But these are still incremental reform efforts. Is HHBE enough? Should the goal of HHBE be to help students function in what is arguably a dysfunctional system or to fundamentally challenge the structural inequities of schooling and society?

Educators need to be clear about the placement of HHBE on the continuum of education “reform” and “revolution.” There is an interesting misalignment between the HHBE scholarship and the actual use of hip hop in schools. Hip Hop scholars and aficionados like to imagine hip hop as a “revolution” and rappers as potential “prophets.” And the websites and advertisements for HHBE sometimes describe the products as equally provocative and forward thinking. However, those serious about hip hop education should ask themselves what is so radical about teaching children to read with rap lyrics? Having students memorize the (fictional) story of Christopher Columbus narrated by Jay Z is simply pro-colonialism set to a dope beat. There is nothing progressive about students dancing to their own degradation. A responsible hip hop education must acknowledge that using hip hop does not necessarily protect children from negative stereotypes or messages of inferiority. Programs that use hip hop to simply reinforce the status-quo norms of schooling are not very “hip hop,” and don’t rise to the definition of emancipatory education exposed in the literature.

In this chapter, we have attempted to sketch out the many issues that hip hop educators should consider before incorporating hip hop into the teaching repertoire. HHBE, we hope, holds much potential and promise but without a concrete social justice or community-orientated mission, bringing hip hop into the class seems like a risky proposition. This is what Houston Baker (1993: 8) observed about the hip hop studies movement in the American academy. The ultimate goal of hip hop studies, like black studies, he wrote, should be to disrupt the

“fundamental whiteness and harmonious Westernness of higher education” concerned only with “tweed-jacketed white men.” As hip hop continues to be appropriated by K-12 schooling, it remains unclear if HHBE is really interested in “bombing the schools”—that is, radically reimagining the nature and purpose of education—or just “boosting the [test] scores.” Hopefully, we can resist using hip hop to indoctrinate students in the standard curriculum, or forwarding the interest of schools over the interests of students.

Discussion Questions

1. The authors are concerned that many teachers are unprepared to use hip hop in schools. What would a hip hop based education certification program look like? Who would develop it?
2. Some education reformers are interested in establishing a common core-curriculum to ensure that all students in all schools are taught the same material. Do you think hip hop should be taught to all students in public schools? Why or why not?
3. An important part of HHBE involves using rap lyrics in classroom activities. Pretend you were going to use lyrics in a high school history class. What songs and artists would you use?
4. The authors suggest that mainstream rappers and famous celebrities might be bad role models for students. Do you agree or disagree?
5. What impact could HHBE have on the quality of the nation’s teaching force? Do you think the inclusion of hip hop will help diversify the teaching pool?

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