

UDC 37.013.43: [793.35: 316.723]

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Hip-Hop Pedagogy's Place in the Classroom

Abstract. This paper addresses the global culture of hip-hop and its application in the classroom through culturally-relevant pedagogy. The author examines the state of American education, explores hip-hop as a lens for educative purposes, and provides an example of hip-hop pedagogy.

The State of American Education

American public education is currently under attack by so-called “reformers” and their zealous belief in the standardized testing system that dominates curricula through preparation. The tests have been debunked as imprecise and inaccurate in measuring or predicting the intelligence of students, and since these tests also have a purpose in measuring the teacher’s accountability in educating their students, it presents harm to continued employment. How intelligence is measured and weighed through testing is inherently flawed largely due to its competitive and individualistic nature, evident through Alfie Kohn’s (2014) explanation, “No matter how many students take an NRT [normreferenced test], no matter how well or poorly they are taught, no matter how difficult the questions are, the pattern of results is going to be the same: Exactly 10 percent of those who take the test will score in the top 10 percent. And half will always fall below the median. That [is] not because our schools are failing; that’s because of what the word *median* means” (p. 14). Due to how testing is valued when schools are being allocated their government funding, Kohn’s analysis displays how the model of standardized testing is inherently doomed to fail a portion of schools. The victims of this structural failure include the school’s administrators, teachers, and students through the defunding of schools or worse, the closing of schools. It is important to examine how standardized testing is a flawed system so that the reader understands the necessity of a pedagogy that transgresses the measures of standardized testing.

Hip-Hop as a Lens for Education

An element that may be useful in such a pedagogy is hip-hop. Hip-hop is a global culture, predominantly popular with young people, recognizable by its music (MC-ing/ DJ-ing), dance (bboys and b-girls), and illustration (Harris, 2019). The MC, also known as the master of ceremonies or the emcee, is most often characterized in hip-hop culture “as a vocalist who rhymes over the sampling, scratching, and mixing supplied by a DJ” (Abe, 2013). This definition does little help if the term, “DJ,” is foreign to the reader. The DJ, also known as the disc jockey, “is a type of musician who creates original music by mixing recorded songs using equipment such as a turntable and mixer. DJs also play music for events, such as weddings or bah mitzvahs, or at dance clubs” (Harmon, 2020). An example of how the MC and DJ work in tandem would be the hip-hop concert.

The master of ceremonies maintains the attention of the audience through rapping, singing, speaking, dancing, or some other action to engage the audience while on stage. The DJ is also on stage and can function as a hype man of sorts for the MC and the crowd, while having the power of what music is played, what volume it is played at, and how long the song lasts before the next one. Dance in hip-hop begun through break dancing, where break dancers were often referred to as b-boys or b-girls (Harris, 2019, p. 11). Although break dancing has lost its popularity, the dance element of hip-hop could be argued to be alive and well through numerous hip-hop dance songs such as “Whole Lotta Choppas” by SadaBaby or “Dior” by the late Pop Smoke. Social media apps like Vine, Instagram, and TikTok, where users record themselves dancing, among other things, also help to popularize new hip-hop dances. The dancing element of hip-hop is also engaged during the concert, with the dancing audience. The MC or the DJ may dance on stage to excite their audience as well. The illustration element of hip-hop began through murals and graffiti being “tagged” on property (Harris, 2019, p. 16). The murals of hip-hop artist, Pop Smoke, following his death (News 12 Staff, 2020) and Dallas Cowboys quarterback, Dak Prescott, following his ankle injury (Amaranthus, 2020) are recent examples of popular graffiti murals. Understanding the four foundational elements of hip-hop¹ is key in understanding hip-hop as a culture, which is a prerequisite of utilizing hip-hop as pedagogy.

Hip-hop serves as a “constructive and contested space for the historically oppressed and marginalized to both resist and challenge social ideologies, practices, and structures that have maintained their subordinate position” (Land, 2009, p. 1). Research finds that people of color studying in STEM fields experience racial discrimination through tokenization, stereotype threat, microaggressions, and overt acts of biases in both social and classroom environments, atop an already competitive and individualistic field (Park, 2020, p. 3). Ivory A. Toldson’s (2020) research found that there are three key areas in American education where opportunity gaps between black and white students exist: “(a) schools discipline Black students more harshly by suspending them for behaviors (e.g. tardiness) that rarely result in suspensions among White students; (b) Schools routinely offer Black students a less rigorous curriculum that omit classes required for college admission; and (c) Black students are the most likely to attend school in segregated learning environments that have fewer resources to educate their students” (p. 4). Because of the sociocultural alienation that faces students of color in the education system (Chalsa, 1986, p. 60), the classroom is prone to functioning as an uncomfortable environment or one of conflict for students of color. To provide an inclusive environment for an oppressed student-body, the global culture of hip-hop can be examined in the lens of culturally-relevant pedagogy. Thus, hip-hop pedagogy is utilized to form inclusive environments for the student-body as a means of challenging an oppressive social structure. Hip-hop pedagogy, although inclusive of those who identify with hip-hop, is not exclusive of those who do not.

It must be affirmed that utilizing hip-hop as a tool of education is not an inauthentic trick to be the “cool” teacher in the classroom. Christopher Emdin (2018), an important figure of the #HipHopEd movement,² claims hip-hop pedagogy showcases “the brilliance, resilience, ingenuity, and intellectual

¹ MC-ing, DJ-ing, dance, and illustration

² #HipHopEd is a culturally-relevant pedagogical movement maintained by educators, students, and other scholars with a focus in the utilization of hip-hop in K-12 educational spaces.

prohess of those are embedded in hip-hop culture but may not have been successful in schools” (p. 1). The inclusion of hip-hop in schooling has been cited as a means for cognitive and physical development as well as expression, engagement, and reflection of students (Broughton, 2017; Hinton, 2020; Landsberg, 2008). The use of hip-hop culture in the K-12 classroom is not some tacky novelty, but an element of culturally-relevant pedagogy that holds a base in being reflective of students, engaging students in relevant topics and discourse, and the fostering of students’ intelligences. Emdin (2018) argues that “hip-hop embodies the awareness, creativity, and innovation that are at the core of any true education” (p. 1). Emdin is correct, and the traits he lists are missing from the current climate of American education, instead subverted by the dominant curricula of rote memorization. When using hip-hop in the classroom, the following guidelines are those that will make for the best experience for the students. They are also efficient for the teacher to use for anyone who has been immersed in hip-hop culture for years and has experience with hip-hop pedagogy as a student both at the high school and the college level.

Hip-Hop’s history with anecdotal experience as a common tool of personal narration often leads to artists’ ingenuous observations on their lives and the social, cultural, and historical factors that influence them. Hip-hop’s base in the ingenuous thought of individuals and collectives, through the common use of anecdotes present in hip-hop culture, helps to create a path for those who engage with the culture to immerse themselves in open-ended thought. As hip-hop reflects students and engages students’ ingenuous thinking, the path towards critical thinking is accessible due to the students being engaged in the ingenuous content of the hip-hop material presented. The teacher connects these patterns of thought through dialogue, requiring the class to express openness, respect, and trust. Paulo Freire’s (1995) description of such dialogue in the context of pedagogical practice follows:

In order to understand the meaning of dialogical practice, we have to put aside the simplistic understanding of dialogue as a mere technique. Dialogue does not represent a somewhat false path that I attempt to elaborate on and realize in the sense of involving the ingenuity of the other. On the contrary, dialogue characterizes an epistemological relationship. Thus, in this sense, dialogue is a way of knowing and should never be viewed as a mere tactic to involve students in a particular task. We have to make this point very clear. I engage in dialogue not necessarily because I like the other person. I engage in dialogue because I recognize the social and not merely individualistic character of the process of knowing. In this sense, dialogue presents itself as an indispensable component of the process of both learning and knowing. (p. 379)

Dialogue presents an opportunity to reject individualism and instead opt for pedagogy rooted in sociality with the students, respecting them as the innately curious and intelligent beings they rightfully are. Hence, dialogical practice that connects the ingenuous and critical thinking of students through hip-hop culture presents a realm of culturally-reflective pedagogy that is effective due to the universal effects of dialogue as praxis and hip-hop as a global youth culture in any setting. In the American setting, this practice is particularly useful to challenge the standardized testing agenda and to move students to a space of equitable education.

Hip-hop’s use in the classroom satisfies meeting the ingenuous thinking of the students through the anecdotal experience expressed in hip-hop materials and how students can connect their own experiences to the material presented, thus engaging them in the class’ dialogue. It must be stated that

if the teacher is close-minded to the students' observations that are built from their experiences with the world, the teacher cannot possibly motivate their students to present their ingenuous observations. It is of the greatest importance that the teacher is open to the students' social and cultural experiences and how these experiences come to shape the students' observations on the social, political, historical, and cultural commentaries present in hip-hop culture. From here, we state the ineptitude of American schooling to be culturally-reflective of all of its students due to the Eurocentric, one-size fits all curricula that dominates most schooling. The lack of curricula that is reflective of those who are not members of the dominant white culture of America fail to be reflected in American curricula as African-American author, Ta-Nehisi Coates (2015) made clear in his statement regarding his French class as an adolescent in West Baltimore public schooling: "France was a rock rotating in another galaxy, around another sun, in another sky that I could not cross" (p. 26). Hip-hop's roots in narratives based on or influenced by lived experience provides the connection with hip-hop and ingenuous thinking via the connection between students' anecdotal experiences and how they connect theirs to the experiences presented in the hip-hop material. Thus, students are engaged in a culturally-reflective pedagogy through hip-hop pedagogy. An example may be in the American history or English classrooms, whereas the class examines Franklin Delano Roosevelt's presidency, the New Deal, and the significance of the National Housing Act of 1934, where conversations on redlining and gentrification may take place for a class period. The wide range of hip-hop that expresses lived experience with America's ghettos makes this topic accessible for those new to hip-hop pedagogy due to the volume of hip-hop culture that reflects lived experiences through the ghettos shaped by redlining, or how the teacher can connect how hip-hop was birthed through a housing crisis in the Southern-Bronx during the 1970's (Naison, 2016). Once the base in ingenuous thinking is established in the class discussion, the teacher can push the class towards a more critical discourse.

The establishment of students' ingenuous thought in discourse presents the ability for the teacher to direct the discussion towards critical thinking. The teacher may now propose a critical question regarding the element and its relationship with the academic material being studied. If the class is discussing a work of graffiti or a song that details the lived experience and/ or criticism of some social, cultural, historical, or political event, the teacher can pose a question such as, "How is [the hip-hop element] relevant to [the academic material being studied in the class]?" then lead the class into discussions regarding the academic material being studied and how effective the hip-hop element is in its ability to be accurate or precise regarding how it frames the subject under discussion. Students now engage in open-ended questioning, whether it be their own questioning of the materials or how they respond to the teacher's critical thinking questions. The purpose of this critical thinking stage is to engage students in the abstract or in open-ended thinking to transgress the multiple-choice thinking that dominates curricula. This multiple-choice thinking is impractical in the most complex age of humanity, one that rarely, if ever, offers an individual only a narrow set of options. The world demands intelligence capable of understanding complexity, and thus, practical open-ended thinking serves this purpose better than narrow-minded, impractical multiple-choice thinking. What has tied together ingenuous thinking and critical thinking in hip-hop pedagogy is the teacher's ability to engage their students in the kind of dialogue that Paulo Freire proposed, cited earlier in this paper, and thus, it is necessary to further detail the importance and procedures of dialogue of hip-hop pedagogy.

Dialogue is rooted in openness as a listener and confidence as a speaker, is a literary tool useful for engaging in reading, writing, listening, and speaking, and is useful to reject the individualistic nature of standardized testing procedures in order to embrace collectivistic social praxis. With hip-hop pedagogy in mind, dialogue as a fundamental part of education offers inclusive discourse for the whole class, allowing students to become more comfortable in public speaking and collaborative work in groups. The process of dialogue as the center-piece connecting hip-hop to the academic material can be illustrated as follows: The teacher organizes a class discussion around some academic material and uses a hip-hop song to connect the academic material to the students in order to make the lesson more reflective of students and as a result, pique their curiosities. The teacher then begins to facilitate the discussion by asking the classroom questions about the song and how they connect it to the academic material. The students make critical observations by taking turns speaking and establishing a respect for literacy through listening and speaking respectfully. That leaves the discussion open for other students to agree, disagree, and be critical of one another's points respectfully. Once the teacher feels the discussion on a topic has gone on long enough, hit some nail on the head, or has gone off topic, the teacher can explicitly provide the point they had planned for the hip-hop material to connect it to the academic material. While this hypothetical example cannot take the complexities of every learning environment into account, it helps to provide a framework of how dialogue benefits hip-hop pedagogy. Thus, dialogue is a necessity to engage students' curiosities and ways of thinking.

The use of culture in the classroom, especially one with musical history, is not exclusive to hip-hop, nor is hip-hop in the classroom mutually exclusive to music. Understanding that hip-hop is a complex culture with a history spanning nearly five decades is important if educators are to have a credible enough understanding of hip-hop to use it to parallel academic materials. If a teacher finds that the utilization of other media will be beneficial in the classroom, then that teacher has the responsibility to carve out the best possible pedagogical practice for their students. Hip-hop has developed a global youth culture, unlike any other musical medium, and as a result there are decades of research into hip-hop culture complemented by successful movements with the aims of utilizing hip-hop in classrooms to engage with students. If a teacher works in a sociocultural setting where hip-hop is not an adequate teaching tool, then they should use a different approach. The teacher should remain culturally active and work in line with students' interests.

An Example of Hip-Hop Pedagogy

An example of using hip-hop within the classroom to engage students with academic material could be through Open Mike Eagle's 2017 album, *Brick Body Kids Still Daydream*. The album found its spark of inspiration from the destruction of the Robert Taylor Homes where Open Mike Eagle was raised in Chicago, Illinois (Galil, 2018). The album communicates a combination of intrinsic and extrinsic themes that properly fulfill the ingenuous and critical thinking patterns that have been outlined in this paper. The intrinsic themes, such as love, beauty, and childhood innocence, communicate the ingenuous feelings and thoughts shaped by the anecdotal experiences of Open Mike Eagle. Students can easily pick up on these themes as they are made explicit throughout the album, notably on the opening track, "Legendary Iron Hood," where Open Mike Eagle concisely describes his family members, his Chicago neighborhood, and himself. Later down the album, on "Daydreaming in the Projects," Open Mike Eagle provides a snapshot of life in the projects of Chicago where he grew up through a lens that recognizes the innate intelligence and beauty of the oppressed

youth, rapping the lines, “This goes out to/ Ghetto children, making codewords/ In the projects around the world/ Ghetto children, fighting dragons/ In the projects around the world” (Eagle, 2017). Eagle continues this chorus a second time later in the song, changing the words that succeed “Ghetto children” to outline more problems that ghetto children solve, eventually wrapping it up in the final lines of the song, “Ghetto children, solving problems/ In the projects around the world” (Eagle, 2017). We now observe multiple examples where *Brick Body Kids Still Daydream* reflects on anecdotal experiences that allow Open Mike Eagle to apply ingenuous thinking towards his family, his neighborhood, and himself throughout the album, all while staying relevant to topics relevant in post-Reconstruction era history. Open Mike Eagle makes his sentiments and themes explicit often, making it accessible for students to point out key points in songs during discussions that allow them to reflect on ingenuous thinking, however, these examples are not exclusive to ingenuous thinking only. We may now observe the critical thinking that factors into the album and how to pull it out into the classroom.

Once students make their observations and develop general theses about the material of *Brick Body Kids Still Daydream* that is covered in class, the discussion can move into more critical waters. Here, students can examine more of the extrinsic themes of the album that shaped Open Mike Eagle’s experiences, such as the infrastructure of the American ghetto, redlining, and gerrymandering. The climactic piece of the album, “Brick Body Complex,” features Open Mike Eagle rapping from the personified perspective of the final Robert Taylor Home and its inhabitants prior to its demolition in a prideful and beautiful representation of the aforementioned intrinsic themes and how they tragically meet their end to the destructive extrinsic themes. This kind of abstract concept allows for students to transgress the multiple-choice thinking that characterizes American schooling and to instead dive into open-ended, abstract thought that is far more practical in the world than that of the guessing game of multiple-choice standardized testing preparation. A key point of examination in the song is the first verse, where Open Mike Eagle, rapping from the perspective of the last remaining Robert Taylor Home prior to its destruction, raps of sovereignty, strength, community, and rejects pessimistic fatalism. In the context of the classroom, discussions can be led towards whether or not Open Mike Eagle’s strong and optimistic verse is reflective of the majority of the oppressed, how the process of gentrification affects inhabitants of the neighborhood, and the context that led up to the practice of gentrification. Students and the teacher may again dive into their anecdotal experience and make ingenuous observations, coupled with connecting these questions to history and making critical analyses of the history of white-supremacy. Students can connect the current affairs of the nation to history to better understand history and as a result, better understand the present. In this engagement, students accomplish the critical analysis of political issues, something that is often thrown to the side in the classroom in favor of rote memorization of impractical topics. This is a narrow view of the addition of hip-hop into curricula written to provide a concrete example of how things can be arranged. Students’ consciousnesses are not some beaker cups full of cerebrospinal fluid; they are always evolving because learning is a continuous process. The example presented is to give a greater picture of a hypothetical scenario for those who are unfamiliar with hip-hop or unfamiliar with it as a tool in the classroom in order to make the concept more easily digestible.

Conclusion

In the pursuit of reflecting and engaging students through the utilization of culturally-relevant pedagogy, mixed with the urge to resist and rebel against the “testocracy” that dominates American schooling, the use of hip-hop culture has affirmed its status for over a decade now with the aforementioned goals in mind. To reflect students and engage them, educators must find materials of hip-hop culture that students can first connect anecdotal experience to in order to make ingenuous observations. From there, the teacher must have a credible knowledge in the hip-hop material they present to the classroom as well as in the academic material they are paralleling in order to precisely make a critical analysis of it. Without this credible base of knowledge or epistemological curiosity, the teacher will likely prove ineffective in provoking students’ critical thinking. Finally, the teacher must connect these elements through dialogue that expresses openness and a fundamental sense of respect for one another and the learning processes of one another. Hip-hop and its impact as a global culture in educational settings has a high ceiling capable of transgressing the climate of standardized testing as well as reflecting and engaging students, and thus it should be treated as the priceless tool of culturally-relevant pedagogy that it is.

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