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## Integrating Hip-Hop and Cultural Relevant Lessons into the Public School Curriculum

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## INTEGRATING HIP-HOP AND CULTURAL RELEVANT LESSONS INTO THE PUBLIC SCHOOL CURRICULUM

Sunni Ali

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### **Abstract**

The infusion of hip-hop into the school's curriculum adds value and meaning for students and teachers (Haaken, Wallin-Ruschman, & Patange, 2012). Despite the cultural shift that altered the organic framework of hip-hop, referencing this art form from its most basic construct spurs student achievement, especially females (Henry, West, & Jackson, 2010). Most importantly, it serves as a cultural-relevant paradigm empowering students' radical engagement with instruction. In addition, it enables teachers to construct lessons that connect students to their community along with social and political aspects influencing society. Students who immerse themselves studying hip-hop lessons have shown literacy improvement and increase activism. The application of a cultural relevant curriculum is an effective way for teachers to develop and tailor instructional lessons to develop noteworthy assignments, projects, and assessments. The goal of instruction should be clear and engage students to increase their learning experiences and stimulate their critical consciousness toward the lessons. The process of transferring instructional lessons to students' communities makes educational activities more relevant and applicable to students' cultural needs.

### **Why A Hip-Hop Curriculum?**

Oftentimes it has been asked how Hip-hop influenced Black youth development in urban communities. In a unique kind of way, the industry has made terrific inroads toward culture with regards to dress, language, and consciousness (Kitwana, 2002). A new youth culture once emerged throughout parts of America changed how urban youngsters viewed education, political spheres, and social dilemmas. Hip-Hop transformed itself overnight from a meaningful, cultural outspoken commodity to a gangster, street-credibility mentality (Ashante, 2009). No longer, do youth find it fashionable to talk about the struggles and the challenges imposed from the system onto their neighborhoods. Now they were eager to rock Versace while toting a gun tucked somewhere within their underwear as their pants drooped just below their buttocks. The values of hip-hop, once a youth movement, have been rearticulated and redefined by corporate rap. Without any protectorates from family structures or communal institutions, youth are conditioned through the music to echo negative thoughts toward women, harbor a failing attitude toward education, and preying upon materialism. To revise or offset the negative influences bombarding youth every day from the corporate vestiges of this industry, it is imperative that an educational framework becomes established within schools, community centers, and other social agencies reaffirming earlier cultural notions of this art form. This could be established by applying a cultural-relevant pedagogy. A cultural-relevant model is designed and structured to help students use inquiry and problem-solving techniques to deconstruct the negative messages

resonating through the music (Ladson-Billings, 2005). As a qualifying method or further approach, this pedagogical model can help students distinguish the relevancy or practicality of the information about their communities. Having students compare and contrast organic and contemporary hip-hop lyrics not only supports students' ability to articulate and synthesize the messages from the music, but also counteracts the destructive opportunistic tactics of corporate rap "dumbing-down" youth's critical thinking abilities. The basis of implementing cultural valve pedagogy within schools, would reestablish youth's cultural identity, enhance their cultural literacy responses, and affirm a positive code of conduct for urban communities.

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### **Applying Cultural-Relevant Pedagogy and Hip-Hop in the Classroom**

In what way does cultural-relevant pedagogy empowers a hip-hop perspective. Essentially the cultural relevant model allows educators to listen to students' needs, address those needs, and connect educators to students' culture. Lessons within the classroom are tailored to support the community in a more meaningful way by adding their voices and cultural perspectives to the instructional narrative (Fernandes, 2011). This model of teaching allows the educator to learn who the students are and relate the curriculum to their needs. What makes this an effective instructional process is that it provides youth with more options within the learning environment. Applying a hip-hop perspective to pedagogy empowers young people's ability to navigate through the curriculum, while integrating their experiences and social observations within an educational community. In particular, some scholars believe the usage of a cultural relevant teaching model that incorporates hip-hop lessons in a literacy or social science course increases minority students' level of engagement, classroom dialogue, and intellectual participation within the academic setting (Gillborn & Ladson-Billings, 2009; Kitwana, 2002; Parker, 2013). Such a learning model further provides minority youth a connector bridge to school because they are better able to transfer their experiences, values, and perspectives to academic learning outcomes (Gillborn & Ladson-Billings, 2009). According to researchers, a culturally relevant education model allows students to personalize their learning experiences while improving their perspective toward school (Perry, Steele, and Hillard III, 2003). As a practice, when educators are able to construct a curriculum integrating hip-hop messaging, it presents meaning and value to young people. Students' cultural language, view, and perspective about hip-hop strengthen literacy and social-science learning opportunities.

### **Using Cultural-Relevant Instruction to Teach Literacy**

A culture relevant model primary focus is to help youth actively respond and socially engage values, attitudes, and beliefs of defining their families and communities (Ladson-Billings, 2005). Reaffirming and challenging youth to interact and involve themselves into their community was the original precept of hip-hop. At first, the industry was largely misunderstood for its different fashion distinctions, values, and linguistic styles (Parker, 2013). Upon the cultural aspects of this industry taking positive roots into the community, many people began to view the empowering facets the music had on youth. Parker cited that when youth are involved in exploring their history, their identity is discovered and a new sense of awareness and consciousness is heightened. It was "cool," according to *Boogie Down Production*, to investigate history to ascertain self-knowledge; it was necessary, from the *Jungle Brother's* perspective, to pick up a "book to school yourself," and; even more appropriate for a "brother to treat a sister like a queen" from the *Brand Nubians* concept of intellectual enlightenment (Clay 2012).

The cornerstone to evoking this level of behavioral and cultural awareness of hip-hop can occur through promoting a cultural-relevant model as a literacy tool. Applying literacy techniques to hip-hop equips students to identify strategies to socially engage and transform their environment. Organic hip-hop encouraged illiteracy or the lack of knowledge, which hindered a person's ability to develop strategies countering predatory individualism, activities, and materialism. The importance of evoking literacy into the daily living routines and practices of a struggling community is nothing new. Books have always been a connective theme in liberation expression, thought, and action. For one, the text serves as an alternative to the experiences and worldviews shaped by the dominant group. It also creates opportunities for oppressed cultural groups to examine and function outside of the pejorative culture domain (Pierre, 2009). In a unique way, literacy provides power to the voiceless while helping them to develop opposing views to address their needs.

Everyday living becomes transformed as individuals seek text as a tool to assess their predicament to define authentic realities. Hip-Hop was such a resourceful tool that was used to include the voice and struggle of a people denied equitable opportunity within the system (Ashante, 2009). Artist served as countervailing forces to portray a different level of expectations and beliefs regarding the conditions defining low-income groups. Rather the voice of the artist, substantiated and supported through literacy, served as a viable resource to enlighten the inner workings of the soul about the dangers of buying into this sort of pathological perspective (Kitwana, 2002). Integrating a cultural-relevant model with hip-hop is an educational source of literacy information could alleviate all kinds of cultural unawareness. For example, students experiencing this art form are told they are important people who can define their own experiences. To validate this source of information, the lyrics from organic rappers' songs can become transplanted into the listening ears of students to help them create an intellectual dialogue of discovery and interaction (Parker, 2013). Coincidentally, it was not surprising to find youth in the late 80s and early 90s walking around with a book bag full of cultural text identifying them as historical investigators, racial critics, and community reformers. The music also did not make youth fall short of learning and identifying with politics and how it develops imbalances of power, equity, and resource distribution. When Public Enemy pronounced,

While the devil takes care of makin all the rules payin mental rent, to corporate presidents (my man my man) ugh, one outta million residents  
bein dissident, who ain't kissin it. The politics of chains and whips got the  
sickness and chips and all the championships (Public Enemy 98)

It spoke to their frustrations and resentment toward unjust policymaking. The deadly impact policies have on people of color is telling and speaks volumes to the way these imbalances affects minority communities. The message from a cultural-relevant model and organic hip-hop enforces that economic and political success depends upon people's level of involvement and activity to amend social conditions. Marginalized groups that do not defend, protect, or counter hegemony are doomed by the oppressor, according to Public Enemy's perspective. This type of political messaging commands students to reject the status quo and work to make a social difference.

### **Applying Cultural-Relevance and Hip-Hop to Communities**

When students acquire an instructional curriculum that successfully integrates their community, they are more apt to engage and mentally immerse themselves within the instructional pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 2005). A teacher's ability to transfer hip-hop lyrics into their instructional practice shapes young people's awareness to current topics, political issues,

and international dilemmas. It also serves to counter the anti-intellectualism pervading many social and cultural circles.

The current crime statistics and educational statistical data, a “dumb-downed,” overly entertained minority population is prime “real estate” to prison (Alexander, 2010; Postman, 1986). It is critical that educators and social activist understand the harmful and persuasive influences this music has on young people, so they can develop critical pedagogy and strategies to neutralize the music’s harmful message. In most minority communities, children as young as nine years of age are found listening to derogatory musical content before their arrival to school (Edmin, 2010). Educators and parents have to work harder deconstructing the harmful influences of hip-hop music. Without doing so, a serious form of conditioning continues to mis-educate youth on how they should think and behave. On the contrary, when youth are exposed to intelligent critiques of society’s structures, it counteracts the “dumbing-down” syndrome funded by corporate extremists. Hip-Hop has a legacy of educating and expanding youth’s cultural knowledge, professional aspirations, and academic pursuits (Kitwana, 2002). When hip-hop listeners hear from Nas:

I think Obama provides hope, and challenges minds/of all races and colors to erase the hate and try to LOVE one another; so many political snakes/ We in need of a break, I'm thinkin I can TRUST this brotha...but will he keep it way real? (Nas, 2008).

They are encouraged to act and become an entitled population. Reviewing socially conscious hip-hop lyrics as part of a literacy strategy in the classroom is an effective way to encourage reading and writing reflective exercises. It further promotes students to critical engage issues consuming their society. The Trayvon Martin federal trial was the result of well-noted artists and activist working together to call attention to this serious issue. P-Diddy, Russell Simons, Jay-Z, and many others placed themselves into the social arena funding and supporting activist such as Al Sharpton and Jessie Jackson to spur the Federal government to re-evaluate the state’s case to not convict George Zimmerman (Clay, 2010). Despite the jury’s decision, this forwards a new hip-hop generation to fight back. An urgent sense of activism and post-civil rights collaboration emerged from this trial as several youth organizations were born from the jury’s decision. Where this goes remains to be seen; however, what this shows is educators and activist must develop a similar partnership to further advance or add to this movement. A mobilized effort from responsible hip-hop artist and educators is an effective way to deconstruct corporate rap negative messaging. This positive effort will offset the serious amount of social apathy, irresponsible behaviors, and excessive consumerist mentalities plaguing far too many urban settings.

### **Constructing an Engaging Cultural-Relevant Pedagogy**

With the emergent of a common-core curriculum within public schools, there is an opportunity to integrate cultural-relevant materials to engage urban youth. Despite the over-amount of testing and instructional scrutiny attached to school curricula, it presents an opportunity for educators to teach cultural literacy and emerging concepts to improve learners’ academic skills. Examples of such practices are shown in several school settings where teachers are developing project-based assessments presenting relevant concepts, i.e. Hip-Hop Education project, Lupe Fiasco Foundation, Hip-Hop Academy, Mobilized 4 Movement project (Asante, 2009; Fernandes, 2011). Students engaged in hip-hop projects within their public schools, university classrooms, and community centers are taught how to research academic journals, create community-based projects, publish their writing, and complete English and Social Studies interdisciplinary tasks. Teachers construct youth empowerment activities within their classrooms

to heighten students' cultural competency and problem-solving skills, which enhance their critical reading and writing proficiency (Edmin, 2010). More importantly, students are engaged in classroom lessons that uphold cultural principles, best practice approaches, and behavioral practices that advance urban communities.

The Baltimore Performing Arts High School and Harvard University have a course entitled: Tupac Shakur's Hip-Hop Pedagogy where students apply literary rhyming schemes by reading and writing Shakespeare (Asante, 2009). The hip-hop principles of *One Love, One Mic: The World is Ours* is used to influence educators, staff, administrators, and community members to engage in societal concerns. In addition, students embrace, connect, and counter stereotypical beliefs exhibited toward minority groups. Students engaged in a curriculum combination of cultural-relevant instruction and hip-hop transform into cultural and intellectual capitalist, which leads them to excel beyond expectations. Ultimately, the integration of a hip-hop curriculum imposes symbiotic connections between educators, learners, and communities and dismisses racial stereotypes, misogyny, and cultural divisions.

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