

Terror Since the Public School Error:
Reconciling Hip Hop and Education

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Introduction

Hip Hop and Education have been presented as oppositional spheres of influence in youth culture. Since its inception, Hip Hop has promoted values that conflict with the aim of the Public Education System. This division was created by the educational budget cuts which led to the rise of Hip Hop instrumentation and ethic. These budgetary cuts, along with the Hip Hop movement it birthed, enforced a culture of destabilization and anti-education in inner-city schools. However, these two spheres of influence can in fact overlap successfully to the benefit of educating urban youth. A possible solution to ending this ceiling of stagnation is using hip hop culture as a tool for education. While Hip Hop has created an urban youth culture of destabilization and anti-education, an embracing of hip hop by the educational system could lead to the development of social consciousness and critical skills both in and out of the classroom.

Part One – Education Births Hip Hop

*You got the music in your body and you can't comprehend
When your mind won't wiggle and your knees will bend
Music ain't nothin but a people's jam
It's DJ Run-D.M.C. rockin without a band
Run-D.M.C.¹*

In the 1970s, educational budget cuts were made throughout the nation.²

In New York City, the epicentre of American commerce and industry, these cuts

¹ Simmons, Joseph "Run", and Darryl "D.M.C." McDaniels. "King of Rock." Perf. Jason "Jam Master Jay" Mizell. Rec. 1984. *King of Rock*. Run-D.M.C. Russel Simmons, Larry Smith, 1984. MP3.

² AP, 6/2/77, AP 3/6/2011, available at:

http://abclocal.go.com/wabc/story?section=news/local/new_york&id=7997576

were undeniably burdensome for all the public school students.³ Between 1976 and 1977, New York City cut 15,000 teachers and faculty throughout its public school system.⁴ The effects of these budget cuts were felt throughout every aspect of the city's educational system. Extracurricular activities, library resources, and supply budgets were curtailed. Students seeking academic enrichment through supplementary programs had very little options. Particularly, students seeking fulfilling music education programs had no options, as music instruction and arts education were one of the primary casualties of these budget cuts.⁵

Nowhere was this effect felt more than in the South Bronx, one of New York City's poorest neighborhoods. The inner-city schools located in the South Bronx received comparatively the same cuts as other schools throughout the city; however, most students in the South Bronx lacked the external resources to supplement their academic enrichment.⁶ Students elsewhere who wanted to further their music education could turn to private, specialized institutions or after-school programs outside of the school system; however, students in the South Bronx did not have these same opportunities available to them.

³ Office of Bill De Blasio: Public Advocate for the City of New York. *How Teacher Layoffs Could Set Back Schools For Years To Come*. New York: Office of Bill De Blasio: Public Advocate for the City of New York, n.d. *Office of the Public Advocate*. Office of the Public Advocate. Web. 18 Apr. 2013. <<http://advocate.nyc.gov/files/TeacherLayoffsBrief.pdf>>.

⁴ Office of Bill De Blasio: Public Advocate for the City of New York. *How Teacher Layoffs Could Set Back Schools For Years To Come*. New York: Office of Bill De Blasio: Public Advocate for the City of New York, n.d. *Office of the Public Advocate*. Office of the Public Advocate. Web. 18 Apr. 2013. <<http://advocate.nyc.gov/files/TeacherLayoffsBrief.pdf>>.

⁵ *Something From Nothing: The Art of Rap*. Dir. Ice T and Andy Baybutt. Prod. Paul Toogood. Perf. Ice-T. Indomina Films, 2012. DVD.

⁶ *Id.*

These poor inner-city students suddenly found themselves without access to the instruments that they viewed as an escape from urban decay and isolation, bringing an end to the once burgeoning mecca of creativity in the jazz movement that characterized the South Bronx in the 1950s and the 1960s.⁷ By cutting education budgets and preventing access to instruments and music instruction, many students searching to express themselves turned to gangs, violence, or drugs. However, other students, unable to use instruments at school and unable to afford instruments at home, began experimenting with the only object in their lives that played music: turntables.⁸ "All the instruments that the kids had to fool around with were turntables," said jazz bassist Calvin Jones.⁹ Students made "something from nothing" and with it created one of the most important cultural, social, and artistic mediums in America's history: Hip Hop.¹⁰

This lack of support from the public education system meant that Hip Hop grew not through proper music instruction, but through a do-it-yourself ethic informed by the harsh street life many of hip hop's early innovators faced. From its inception, Hip Hop "provided a cultural space for African-American youth to question and interpret social and economic conditions, projections of the urban environment to form the critical content of discourse."¹¹ These early Hip Hop

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ "McBride, D.C., Herbie and the Future of Jazz." East Tennessean, 10 Oct. 2002. Web. 18 Apr. 2013. <<http://www.easttennessean.com/viewpoint/mcbride-d-c-herbie-and-the-future-of-jazz-1.2053254#.UYRmHcoteji>>.

¹⁰ *Something From Nothing: The Art of Rap*. Dir. Ice T and Andy Baybutt. Prod. Paul Toogood. Perf. Ice-T. Indomina Films, 2012. DVD.

¹¹ Grant, Elizabeth. "Gangsta Rap, the War on Drugs and the Location of African-American Identity in Los Angeles, 1988-92." *European Journal of American Culture* 21.1 (2002): 4-15. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 1 Dec. 2012.

innovators used their music to express the societal issues facing their lives. For the first time, these forgotten children of the street had a voice and they used that voice to spread themes of distrust against the establishment.

*School is like a 12 step brainwash camp
They make you think if you drop out you ain't got a chance
To advance in life, they try to make you pull your pants up
Students fight the teachers and get took away in handcuffs
Dead Prez¹²*

The themes and lyrics in Hip Hop have always been a reflection of urban life. “From the 1970s through the present, a decreasing government budget for community programs... and a flight of entrepreneurial and better-educated community members...have made the social, economic and cultural environment of the Projects ever more desperate.”¹³ Hip Hop became a manifestation of the youth’s frustration with this status quo. Hip Hop artists frequently spoke out against policy-based inadequacies, which effected urban schools. Themes of structural prejudice and abandonment of minorities have remained prevalent throughout generations of Hip Hop artists. Today Hip Hop has become a testimony to “a pattern of disenfranchisement and neglect that inner city residents experience under a discriminatory system of power.”¹⁴

¹² Stic.man, and M-1. "They Schools." Rec. 1999. *Let's Get Free*. Dead Prez. Dead Prez Hedrush Lord Jamar Kanye West, 1998. MP3.

¹³ Butler, Udi Mandel. “The Projects: Gang And Non-Gang Families In East Los Angeles.” *Journal Of The Royal Anthropological Institute* 17.2 (2011): 146-149. Academic Search Complete. Web. 23 Nov. 2012.

¹⁴ "sw8uz" "Some Things Never Change: Discrimination and Distrust in Los Angeles." *Dr. Nielson's FYS 100 Blog*. Richmond University, 4 Dec. 2012. Web. 17 Apr. 2013. <<http://blog.richmond.edu/rapmusic/2012/12/04/some-things-never-change-discrimination-and-distrust-in-los-angeles/>>.

This discriminatory system of power creates an atmosphere of distrust directed at institutions, like the education system, that are supposed to protect and inform.¹⁵ As a reaction to the lack of stability and protection afforded by these social institutions, Hip Hop artists and the urban communities they represent are faced with a polarizing dichotomy: Do they fight back or do they abandon the very same institutions they feel have abandoned them?

Part Two – The Authenticity Problem

*Real life preservation, what I'm hustling for
My name Black Thought, the definition of raw
I was born in South Philly, on a cement floor
I had nothing at all, had to knuckle and brawl
They swore I'd fall, be another brick in the wall
The Roots¹⁶*

This atmosphere of distrust is manifested in the discriminatory behavior used in qualifying authenticity. Hip Hop is analogous with urban youth, who profess themselves as “the direct inheritors of Hip Hop culture.”¹⁷ However, because these pervasive themes of distrust have been so prevalent since Hip Hop’s inception, authenticity serves as one of the most salient boundaries in the culture.¹⁸ The urban youth do not trust established institutions and because of this, outsiders, such as teachers, are naturally questioned and scrutinized.¹⁹ Being

¹⁵ *Id.*

¹⁶ Thought, Black. "Long Time." Perf. Ahmir 'Questlove' Thompson. Rec. Apr. 2006. *Game Theory*. The Roots. Owen Biddle, J Dilla, Richard Nichols, The Randy Watson Experience, The Roots, 2006. CD.

¹⁷ Harkness, Geoff. "Skip to Main Page Content Home OnlineFirst All Issues Subscribe RSS Rss Email Alerts Search This Journal Advanced Journal Search » True School: Situational Authenticity in Chicago’s Hip-Hop Underground." *Cultural Sociology* 6.3 (2012): 283-98. 284. *Sage Journals*. Web. 18 Apr. 2013. <<http://cus.sagepub.com/content/6/3/283>>.

¹⁸ *Id. at 285.*

¹⁹ *Id.*

authentic and being respectful to the culture is the way to gain the trust of the youth embedded in the movement.

Staying true to one's self, as opposed to following what social institutions dictate, is one factor in measuring authenticity.²⁰ However, authenticity is often linked to various class indicators.²¹ Class-based cultural boundaries identify those who are permitted to participate in the culture. Those accustomed to plight and struggle, such as the working and lower class, are seen as authentic. On the other hand, inauthenticity is found in those who are formally educated.²² Street wisdom and savvy are valued over "book smarts". "Grinding", or working hard and toiling in the streets to achieve success, is prized.²³ Inner-city residents are working class paragons of this "grinding" lifestyle while educated, often suburban denizens, are seen as an extension of the long-distrusted social institutions.

Part Three – Hip Hop's Value in Education

*Boys and girls, listen up
You can be anything in the world, in God we trust
An architect, doctor, maybe an actress
But nothing comes easy, it takes much practice
Nas²⁴*

While Hip Hop's values seem to be at odds with the goals of education, Hip Hop based education can "help reform inner-city schools, improve student-

²⁰ *Id.* at 294.

²¹ *Id.*

²² Harkness, Geoff. "Skip to Main Page Content Home OnlineFirst All Issues Subscribe RSS Rss Email Alerts Search This Journal Advanced Journal Search » True School: Situational Authenticity in Chicago's Hip-Hop Underground." *Cultural Sociology* 6.3 (2012): 283-98. 294. *Sage Journals*. Web. 18 Apr. 2013.

²³ *Id.*

²⁴ Jones, Nasir. "I Can." Rec. 2002. *God's Son*. Nas. The Alchemist, Ron Browz, Eminem, Nas, Salaam Remi, Chucky Thompson, Agile, 2002. MP3.

teacher dynamic and promote literacy.”²⁵ Critics see Hip Hop in education as a movement that rewards oppositional culture over educational excellence; however, proponents argue that embracing Hip Hop through a pedagogical approach can focus the development of student’s critical thinking skills through active exchange and discussion as opposed to the passive transmission of information present in the traditional approach.²⁶ By meeting students at their level, educators can break the walls of distrust, “decreasing the social distance between school adults and youth.”²⁷ But simply using Hip Hop as a novelty in education is not enough. Teachers must “collaborate with students to construct culturally relevant knowledge”, integrating Hip Hop and engaging students through Hip Hop culture on a daily basis.²⁸

Educators should not approach Hip Hop as a social problem.²⁹ Many point to the violence and sexism found in some Hip Hop lyrics as a reason to avoid its use in schools, but that is only one aspect of a very complex artistic medium.³⁰ Educators need to be aware of the various themes and norms in Hip Hop by emphasizing the myriad of positive and socially conscious artists.³¹ “Hip Hop intelligentsia”, such as Public Enemy and KRS-One, have used Hip Hop as a

²⁵ Hill, Marc Lamont. (2009). *Beats, Rhymes, and Classroom Life: Hip-Hop Pedagogy and the Politics of Identity*. New York: Teachers College Press.

²⁶ Gosa, Travis L., and Tristan G. Fields. "Is Hip Hop Education Another Hustle? The (Ir)Responsible Use of Hip Hop as Pedagogy." *Hip-Hop(e): The Cultural Practice and Critical Pedagogy of International Hip-Hop* (2012): 1-25. 2. *Vivo Cornell*. Web. 20 Apr. 2013. <<http://vivo.cornell.edu/display/n26239>>.

²⁷ *Id.* at 5.

²⁸ *Id.* at 6.

²⁹ Gosa, Travis L., and Tristan G. Fields. "Is Hip Hop Education Another Hustle? The (Ir)Responsible Use of Hip Hop as Pedagogy." *Hip-Hop(e): The Cultural Practice and Critical Pedagogy of International Hip-Hop* (2012): 1-25. 10. *Vivo Cornell*. Web. 20 Apr. 2013. <<http://vivo.cornell.edu/display/n26239>>.

³⁰ *Id.*

³¹ *Id.*

platform for instruction in spirituality and contemporary issues.³² Furthermore, campaigns, such as the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, recognize the motivational capacity of Hip Hop and have enlisted proponents to inspire and reassure high school and college graduation rates.³³

The method in which Hip Hop is integrated into education will be the deciding factor in whether or not the pedagogy will be accepted by students. Responsible educators must be aware that the use of Hip Hop by educational institutions may aggravate this aforementioned long history of distrust.³⁴ Teachers typically lack the authenticity that is valued by Hip Hop culture. Students may view this integration of Hip Hop into education as an exploitation of their culture by the educated middle and upper classes. However, a successful Hip Hop curriculum “will have to assure parents, teachers and future employers that authenticity will not interfere with the development of skills” necessary to flourish in society.³⁵ The ideal educator will balance, finding ways to connect Hip Hop to concrete skills, interweaving Hip Hop with the core curriculum to make relatable inferences between a familiar urban life and traditional education.³⁶

³² Harris, Mark. (2005). Edutainment: The Rise and Fall of Hip-Hop's Intelligentsia. *PopMatters*, Retrieved January 26, 2010. <http://www.popmatters.com/music/features/050401-edutainment.shtml>.

³³ Gosa, Travis L., and Tristan G. Fields. "Is Hip Hop Education Another Hustle? The (Ir)Responsible Use of Hip Hop as Pedagogy." *Hip-Hop(e): The Cultural Practice and Critical Pedagogy of International Hip-Hop* (2012): 1-25. 7. *Vivo Cornell*. Web. 20 Apr. 2013. <<http://vivo.cornell.edu/display/n26239>>.

³⁴ *Id.* at 10.

³⁵ *Id.* at 7.

³⁶ "Songs in the Key of Biology: Students Write Hip-Hop to Learn Science." Interview by Ray Suarez. *PBS Newshour*. PBS. PBS, New York, New York, 27 Mar. 2013. Radio. Transcript.

Part Four – Hip Hop Education in Practice

*The systematic knowledge of the physical world
Gained through observation and experimentation
Usually beginning with a hypothesis
Or what some may call an estimation
Record your results from a series of tests
And what you're left with is a theory at best
Now let me give my hypothesis, an educated guess
On why my people on the whole seem to be such a mess*
Murs³⁷

Throughout the country, educators and educational programs have experimented with integrating Hip Hop into their curriculum through various methods. Craig Kegler, a high school English teacher in Michigan, used Hip Hop to inspire social and political change in his students through several exercises.³⁸ One such exercise had students examine lyrics by prominent rapper Tupac Shakur and make connections to the novel, *The Scarlet Letter*.³⁹ While Tupac is primarily known for his harsh “thug” persona, many of his songs incorporate uplifting and inspirational messages. For example, students responded to a line in Tupac’s song, “Keep Ya Head Up”: “I give a holla to my ladies on welfare. Tupac cares if nobody else care.”⁴⁰ This line resonated with the students and led to a discussion about Michigan’s “Welfare to Work” laws, urban poverty, and single mothers.⁴¹ One student later wrote that his mother’s food stamp card felt like a “scarlet letter” to him and his family, commenting on the embarrassment his

³⁷ Carter, Nick. "The Science." Rec. 2008. *Murs for President*. Murs. 9th Wonder, Keith Harris, Mr. Khaliyl, DJ Quik, Terrace Martin, Nottz, Josef Leimberg, Scoop DeVille, Knotch, LT Moe, 2008. MIDI.

³⁸ Kirkland, David E., Ph. D. "'You Must Learn': Promoting Hip-hop in Education." *Youth Media Reporter* (2008): n. pag. 6 June 2008. Web. 19 Apr. 2013.

<http://www.youthmediareporter.org/2008/06/you_must_learn_promoting_hiphop.html>.

³⁹ *Id.*

⁴⁰ *Id.*

⁴¹ *Id.*

mother felt as strangers looked down on her for using food stamps at the grocery store.⁴²

The English teacher noted that assignments like this help students “achieve not only a critical literacy but a social awareness” that can compel action.⁴³ The students were encouraged to write letters to local politicians regarding their concern with the “Welfare to Work” laws.⁴⁴ Analyzing other lyrics led to discussions of self-esteem, purpose, and justice in urban sociology, providing an outlet to express and comprehend the social inequalities that exist in inner-city society.

Dr. Chris Emdin, a professor from Columbia University’s Teachers College, has worked to create a program integrating science education with Hip Hop.⁴⁵ Dubbed “Science Genius”, the curriculum requires students to write raps about science using vocabulary and concepts from the course.⁴⁶ This program has been implemented in ten New York City public schools and has engaged students who typically underperform in sciences.⁴⁷ As opposed to the traditional classroom approach of absorbing information and redelivering that information in an exam, the students are challenged to think critically about the concepts and integrated the concepts into a relatable methodology. The students cannot just write simple rhymes, but must have a nuanced understanding of the concepts in

⁴² *Id.*

⁴³ *Id.*

⁴⁴ *Id.*

⁴⁵ “Songs in the Key of Biology: Students Write Hip-Hop to Learn Science.” Interview by Ray Suarez. *PBS Newshour*. PBS. PBS, New York, New York, 27 Mar. 2013. Radio. Transcript.

⁴⁶ *Id.*

⁴⁷ *Id.*

order to develop verses that flow both musically and lyrically.⁴⁸ Dr. Emdin notes that the skills of the best rappers parallel those of a successful scientist: curiosity, keen observation, and the ability to draw connections.⁴⁹

The class mirrors the form of a “cypher,” a Hip Hop freestyle forum. Students form groups and take turns providing verses.⁵⁰ Like with Hip Hop “cyphers”, the best of these science cyphers feature verses that support or respond to previous verses.⁵¹ This encourages students to edit and rework their lyrics in an improvisational manner, requiring that students have a deep enough understanding of the material to quickly make inferences based on the conjectures of other students in their group.⁵² This is not meant to be a hostile battle, rather every student is given an equal opportunity to speak and favorable verses are met with positive reinforcements, all elements of an ideal classroom.⁵³ Through this method, Dr. Emdin has taken one of the most difficult subjects and led students to invest themselves not only into the vocabulary and concepts, but to the applicability of science to their everyday lives.

Students are encouraged to put forth their best work in order to place in a competition with the other participating classrooms across the city. This competition is judged by rap legend GZA, of the rap group Wu Tang Clan, and

⁴⁸ *Id.*

⁴⁹ Leland, John. "A Hip-Hop Experiment." *The New York Times*, 16 Nov. 2012. Web. 1 May 2013. <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/18/nyregion/columbia-professor-and-gza-aim-to-help-teach-science-through-hip-hop.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0>.

⁵⁰ *Id.*

⁵¹ *Id.*

⁵² "Songs in the Key of Biology: Students Write Hip-Hop to Learn Science." Interview by Ray Suarez. *PBS Newshour*. PBS. PBS, New York, New York, 27 Mar. 2013. Radio. Transcript.

⁵³ Leland, John. "A Hip-Hop Experiment." *The New York Times*, 16 Nov. 2012. Web. 1 May 2013. <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/18/nyregion/columbia-professor-and-gza-aim-to-help-teach-science-through-hip-hop.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0>.

the best verses are published on the website Rap Genius.⁵⁴ GZA, who was drawn to this program by his own frustration with the education system, has always placed an emphasis on intelligent lyrics and “crafting the best rhyme in the most articulate, witty or smart way”, leading Hip Hop fans to refer to him as “GZA the Genius.”⁵⁵ GZA’s involvement in the program gives it credibility amongst members of Hip Hop culture, undercutting any fears of in-authenticity that students may have.

Conclusion

These programs are merely two unique ways that innovative educators have chosen to integrate Hip Hop with the educational process. While there may be some challenges, particularly in regards to authenticity and accessibility, these programs can be successful with a commitment to engage students in a new way. Through the budget cuts of the 1970s, the Education system gave birth to Hip Hop. Rather than fighting its dominance in urban youth culture, educators can use Hip Hop as a tool to reach students and regain their trust in the establishment. This process will take a generation of teachers willing to understand the positive aspects of Hip Hop, the outcome being an opportunity to improve the student experience. By relating to students through Hip Hop, educators may find that their embrace of Hip Hop in pedagogy may lead to an embrace of education by the urban youth.

⁵⁴ "Songs in the Key of Biology: Students Write Hip-Hop to Learn Science." Interview by Ray Suarez. *PBS Newshour*. PBS. PBS, New York, New York, 27 Mar. 2013. Radio. Transcript.

⁵⁵ Leland, John. "A Hip-Hop Experiment." *The New York Times*, 16 Nov. 2012. Web. 1 May 2013. <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/18/nyregion/columbia-professor-and-gza-aim-to-help-teach-science-through-hip-hop.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0>.