5. "I'm Teaching This for the Culture!"

Reexamining the Ideological Tensions and Institutional Constraints of Teaching Hip-Hop–Based Music Education Within the Formal Classroom

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Abstract: Hip-hop–based education, the usage of hip-hop practices and pedagogy in urban classrooms, has been argued by many researchers as very beneficial to understanding how to improve the educational disparities of urban youth in low-income environments. However, if public school systems are unaccepting of the "organic" and unstructured nature of hip-hop culture (language, style, dress, and its resistance to the status quo), how can hip-hop practices be used substantially within the classroom? This paper examines the constraints and ideological conflict when teaching hip-hop music production in the formal music classroom. Focusing on pedagogical work of the teaching artists within a school-based hip-hop music program in an urban school district, this article uses in-depth interviews with five teaching artists/facilitators working within a hip-hop–based music education program in Chicago. By using the narratives of these teachers as units of analysis, qualitative methods were used to examine how teaching artists overcame the ideological conflicts of their host institutions during the implementation of the program's curriculum. Overall, this case study reveals how administrative expectations (or lack thereof) for hip-hop's utility in the classroom greatly influences how the learning in hip-hop programs is, or is not, taking place. The findings suggest that school administrators, teachers, and other staff members could stand to take a more concerted interest in understanding the complexity of the artistic processes involved in rap music making as well as the culture attached to it if they sincerely want hip-hop pedagogy to be effective in their schools.

Background and Introduction

Hip-hop culture has continually been identified by media scholars as the dominant voice of youth culture (Forman & Neal, 2004). Rap music, the most performative and visible product of the culture, is a global phenomenon and a billion-dollar industry that influences the ways in which youth form their identity, connect with their peers, and make meaning of the world around them. For the last 20 years, several scholars have written extensively about the benefits of hip-hop–based education (HHBE) programs in formal learning environments (see Petchauer, 2009). In creating frameworks that explain its course of action or preferred approach, empirical research has consistently linked HHBE to critical pedagogy (Akom, 2009) and culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995), identifying HHBE as a great means to teaching social justice or youth activism by addressing dominant issues of race, racism, and oppression in the lived experience of African American students. Many scholars have claimed that hip-hop pedagogy offers an education in which learners can work toward their desired aspirations via mediums that are familiar to them and build upon their already acquired knowledge (Emdin, 2016; Hill & Petchauer, 2013). Numerous scholars have also produced evidence that suggests the power of hip-hop–themed media interventions to drive self-empowerment and academic efficacy with underperforming students (Dimitriadis, 2001; Forman, 2002; Hill, 2009; Ibrahim, 1999; Stovall, 2006; Thibeault, 2010). These studies have almost exclusively focused on the positive socioemotional outcomes of the students, expanded on theories of linguistics, and emphasized an ability of HHBE to help instructors build rapport/trust within their classrooms (see Petchauer, 2009). However, several book projects (Desai, 2010; Emdin & Adjapong, 2018; Fisher, 2007; Hill, 2009; Low, 2011; Seidel, 2011; Watkins & Cho, 2018) have provided models of how we might begin to reconceptualize the purpose of public education and develop hip-hop pedagogies with a more critical, liberatory lens.

This study aimed to address those concerns by exploring the narratives of teaching artists employed by a hip-hop–based education program that is being piloted in Chicago elementary schools. Through use of several informal conversations, field notes from in-class observations, as well as transcriptions of four semistructured interviews, this paper explores the ideological tensions of teaching hip-hop music making as a formal school subject. The primary aim of this paper is to elaborate on the tensions and constraints faced by the teaching artists with the integration of hip-hop into the formal learning environment.

In the following sections of this paper, I suggest that while school administrators generally believe that this type of class offering is based in the cultural-linguistic reality of their students, teaching artists often feel their instructional freedom is marginalized within the academic spaces they serve. In investigating how teachers mitigate these obstacles and approach school music from a hip-hop cultural perspective, this examination is guided by the following general research questions:

1. What are the creative constraints to inserting hip-hop–making practices in formal academic spaces?
2. Do teaching artists still encourage hip-hop music as free creativity or are there constraints placed on their students' music compositions because of the setting? If so, how do they balance this?
3. How do teaching artists negotiate their real-life experiences in hip-hop with meeting the demands of the academic institutions that employ them?

Along the same lines, I previously have suggested that hip-hop composition in academic spaces could be a form of new media literacy that is useful to African American youth for cultivating skills in analyzing media codes and conventions; in abilities to criticize stereotypes, dominant values, and ideologies; and in competencies to interpret the multiple meanings and messages generated by all media texts (Evans, 2019). The findings of that study suggest that HHBE, as a media literacy intervention, could (and should) be used with its listeners to help them to discriminate and evaluate media content, to critically dissect media forms, to investigate media effects and uses, to use media intelligently, and to gain skills to construct their own alternative media. Even so, this can occur only if schools seriously invest in supporting curricula to empower students to practice media literacy—which means thinking critically about the social function of digital media and implications of technological advancements.

Ultimately, I argue in this study that implementation of hip-hop music in elementary education, inasmuch as it takes place in classrooms and is mediated by codified and standardized pedagogical material, involves new challenges and paradoxes for teachers and students, who strive to inform their creative labor and teaching by the traditions, ideologies, and ideals—whether real or imagined—of the music.

Case Study: Background and Corpus of the Data

As the third-largest city in the United States, Chicago is home base to a vast array of arts and cultural institutions, universities and scientific organizations, and many vibrant and diverse cultures. It is also a city that is well documented as having many racial, economic, and political tensions. Chicago's racial/ethnic and economic inequities have a long-standing history and have been characterized as "pervasive, persistent, and consequential" (Hendricks, Lewis, Arenas, & Lewis, 2017, p. 16). Poverty is concentrated on the south and west sides of the city, which are also the areas with the highest concentrations of Black or African American and Hispanic populations (Bloch, Cox, & Giratikanon, 2015).

Between 2016 and 2019, I studied the impact of hip-hop–based education within elementary schools on what the popular press has deemed some of Chicago's poorest communities on the south and west sides. According to Chicago Public Schools' (CPS's) *State of the Arts Education Report*, of the 23 school districts in those communities, at least 50% of the principals in 22 of those districts stated that their students would like to have more programs teaching Hip-Hop

Composition, Deejaying, and Spoken Word in their school curriculums (Ingenuity, 2019). Additionally in 10 of those districts, hip-hop was the top requested type of programming by students in their survey responses.

In this article, I am examining a program seeking to fill that void: Foundations of Music's Songwriting and Production (SWP) program. The sponsor of the program, Foundations of Music, is an arts-oriented nonprofit organization in Chicago that aims to deliver culturally relevant arts education to Chicago students in elementary and middle schools. Using a research-based curriculum, teaching artists work with partner schools and communities to foster student connections to music, the arts, and the world around them. Its programs aim to ignite curiosity, develop skills, and promote social-emotional growth. Foundations of Music now reaches more than 5,000 students in nearly 40 schools.

Foundations of Music's SWP program introduces students aged 10-14 years to both the process of writing original rap/hip-hop songs and the technology used to produce them. SWP participants create within a pre-production and recording setup in the classroom with trained teaching artists who travel to the school and set up mobile workstations for the students to record music. Following a project-based learning model, the program's final objective is that the class participants will collaborate to write, produce, record, and mix three original songs over 10 weeks. The data I am drawing from are informed by two components: field notes from participant observations and in-depth interviews. Overall, I conducted more than 250 hours of classroom observation and completed five in-depth interviews with teaching artists. During this time, I logged 83 written entries on a word-processing application on my cellular phone, compiling almost 150 pages of field notes pertaining to the teaching strategies and curriculum fidelity employed within the program.

Methods and Analysis

As the lone researcher on this study, I transcribed my field notes and interview tapes (verbatim) to a word processor and coded them using ATLAS.ti software. As I employed a grounded-theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), concepts and categories emerged in the process of doing my fieldwork and inductive coding. Early on in my observations, I was primarily trying to look for ways in which the program enhanced typical academic achievement measurement outcomes such as test scores. However, that focus was a "dead end" and led me to seeing occupational identity as a key independent variable related to the SWP program. However, as the study evolved out of the field into the analysis process, the theme of teacher artists' having ongoing negotiation between structure and uncertainty in temporal dimensions became salient in my theoretical memos. Recognizing each 10-week class sequence as a cohort and a unique study of analysis, I returned to the field to collect data relevant to my insight, and then I decided to ask clarifying questions to teaching artists and other key stakeholders in semistructured interviews to connect emerging insights across multiple data sources (e.g., MP3 files, photographs, and lyric journals).

While field notes largely captured the picture of teaching and learning practices in the SWP program, interviews deepened insight into how teaching artists actively played with the literacy standards set forth by their host administrators: Common Core Standards set forth by the State of Illinois Board of Education. Data within these field notes were marked with parent themes that reflected three operational levels at which the program appeared to cause tension for teacher implementation: school culture, student learning goals, and teacher pedagogical approach. I then revisited my data and refined subcategories of the theoretical codes into three points of tension: Structure versus Uncertainty, Craft versus Art, and Street Authenticity versus School Conformity. Each of these themes addressed separate research questions in my inquiry and data from each field note made up one cumulative case study.

Case-based qualitative methods are useful in revealing complex processes that unfold through time (Yin, 2013).This investigation is a holistic multiple case study (Yin, 2009). Holistic case studies, which value and investigate the contexts in which cases exist, can blur the lines between case study and ethnography. Although they might constrain generalizability, they are situated for analyzing social phenomena that are previously unknown or understudied (Glaser

& Strauss, 1967; Lofland & Lofland, 1995; Small, 2009). Though the SWP program and its teaching artists who were chosen for this study were convenient to the researcher, they have an unusual presence within an urban public school system and display an unusual case, one that can drive the ability for researchers to observe the complex creative and learning processes that are needed for further study of hip-hop pedagogy.

There was no incentive for interviewed or observed participants. Study procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Board at the sponsoring institution of the researcher. Finally, pseudonyms were assigned to all teachers observed in this study to preserve their anonymity. Additionally, pseudonyms were given for the names of the schools and any information regarding their exact location. In the following sections of this paper I will discuss the findings of my interviews and unstructured conversations with three of the SWP program's teaching adult facilitators (Supa, Malcolm, and Jerry) as they actively helped their students in hip-hop–making practices.

The SWP Classroom, Defined

The class structure and processes of the SWP program sessions that I observed looked much different from one might expect in the typical didactic music classroom. At a basic time-structure level, SWP classes were generally broken up into three sections: The first part of the class (25 minutes) was used to lead students through a five-minute lecture and 20 minutes of writing time to develop and refine lyrics and vocal and performance exercises to gain confidence and poise when presenting one's work, and the second part of the class (25 minutes) was used to provide students a structured free time to work on their individual projects with the recording technology and music-production software. For the final 10 minutes of the course, students were given the opportunity to learn how to constructively critique their work, as well as that of their peers.

In terms of content of the curriculum, the course's group discussion prompts and lesson themes were designed and guided with reference to James Peterson's (2013) four educational elements of hip-hop, which were created to understand the components that underwrite many initiatives that bring hip-hop culture into the classroom but most important, classrooms needing principles centered on composition. These elements were also keyed upon by the program founders to teaching artists because they have been widely described in the scholarly literature as the driving sensibilities, mindsets, and approaches embedded in the hip-hop aesthetic form (Petchauer, 2009). These elements are defined as follows:

1. Knowledge—Understanding of popular culture, current events, and various media that they regularly interact with;
2. Consciousness—Debating over the contents of the music they listen to and/or admire, articulating space and place and/or providing sociopolitical commentary;
3. Search and Discovery—Development of new musical skills and sensibilities; additionally, actively seeking resources that will build skills and sensibilities that directly relate to their individual project;
4. Participation—Active contribution to class projects and/or day-to-day class discussions that allow students to hone their critical thinking and develop knowledge of composition.

Additionally, a major component differentiating the SWP class process was that all workshops purposely would begin and end with youth participant voices rather than with the voice of the teaching artist. This was designed so that the students would feel empowered and safe to set the "tone" in the classroom. At the start of a workshop, this can take the form of a "check-in," in which participants introduce themselves and declare how they are feeling and what they want to accomplish that day. Often, SWP classes started with a wall-write, which was when participants had to respond to a prompt written on a dry-erase board hanging on the wall—such as "What does it mean to be from the hood?" and then brainstorming about the question to start the songwriting process.

Summary and Discussion of Findings

Interviewees suggested that hip-hop is a tool to teach youth of color to solve problems and that it is not the solution itself. Fieldwork in this study illuminates that developing any type of future-ready curriculum or SWP-like program requires future-ready administration to properly invest (financially and with instructor development) in its implementation. Though the teaching artists in this study often went above and beyond in the name of their students' academic and professional success, their interviews revealed much frustration and disillusionment about how their work was valued in the academic space. Evidence presented in this study also shows that formal and informal learning strategies act in a dialectic way, which indicates that rap musicians combine formal and informal learning strategies in their practice of musical learning (Söderman & Folkestad, 2010).

The findings of this study suggest that simplistic and stereotypical misgivings about students and their attachment to hip-hop culture still exist and greatly influence the ways in which hip-hop is delivered in the classroom. In this paper, I suggest that the unstructured systems of hip-hop music making are hardly conducive to the standardized evaluation normally appreciated by parents and administrators. In reflecting on the ways in which these teaching artists seek to combat meeting the demands of their school's learning cultures, I saw three major themes emerge through the course of this exploration: (a) reframing curriculum outcomes to match those related to standardized tests, (b) focusing on hip-hop's craft and professionalism as a form of vocational training, and (c) reality pedagogy—challenging the status quo, doing what is necessary to give students freedom of expression, even if it means ignoring school rules.

During the course of this study, I have found that many teachers and school administrators carry an implicit bias about hip-hop as deviant, disruptive, and counter to academic achievement and ideal school culture. The reason is that they believe hip-hop is meant to be improvisational, interest-driven, and self-expressive. Thus teachers of this kind of music education must adjust their curricula to the tenor of each and every class that they teach and every student that they teach. The current case study suggests to me that hip-hop can lead to its greatest gains in education by our seeing its vocational value in the future of today's youth.

Whether we are talking about engineering, business, advertising, marketing, social media, entrepreneurship, or any form of creative labor, rap music as a practice has the capabilities to develop at-promise youth into engaged citizens in modern society. Unfortunately, the uncertainty that interest-driven media-making brings during academic class time often does not fit with the way public school teachers are typically assessed for job performance. Additionally, those administrators who have the ability to change the typical imperatives that are allowed and expected in primary school spaces reported being overwhelmed by constant demands to directly connect all in-school activities to improving test scores.

Nonetheless, hip-hop scenes can (and should) be recognized by scholars and stakeholders as a legitimate site of labor for urban youth of color. Since opportunities are not always available to men of color in the formal labor market, many are distrustful of that system and opt to participate in more entrepreneurial endeavors. This allows them to control their image, create and promote their personal narrative, maintain individuality, and find a sense of self-worth and belonging in something positive. The basic assumptions of this study are that music education could easily be reoriented to fit the "post-performance" digitized forms of today's popular music and that this, in turn, should reorient how we evaluate the goals, missions, and values of music education. However, my findings suggest that this can be done only if educators are allowed to sincerely be responsive to young people's interests and ingenuity. The educators in this study have sought vigorously to find ways to connect hip-hop music production/composition to concrete skills and opportunities in the modern labor market. Even so, all subjects in this study indicated that their instruction lost its transformative potential when school administrators made demands for more structure, requesting that the lessons teach technical skills that might reproduce hegemonic representations.

The findings of this study suggest that while hip-hop can (and should) be recognized as a legitimate site of labor for urban youth of color, many administrators have erroneously attributed how youth of color "put culture to work" in hip-hop as devoid of work ethic, ingenuity, or savvy. What many might regard as play is actually work in the field of hip-hop. Framing youth engagement with cultural practices as work reframes them as cultural producers who shape and control their environments with subcultural capital that they possess. Such an acknowledgment is truly the difference between academic "buy-in" and disengagement. For this reason, I recommend that urban school districts examine the degree to which hip-hop is addressed in their teacher- and leadership-development curriculum. For those of us who recognize the power of hip-hop, it is simply unacceptable that urban educators are unfamiliar with the significance of this culture's impact on young people and on the world. Denying or overlooking its impact is both short-sighted and unjust.

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