

**“Bitch, Don’t Kill My Vibe!”:
Navigating the Tension Between Empowering Youth through
Hip-Hop Literacies and Existing School Behavioral Norms**

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Abstract: Dahl argues that instructors can authentically immerse themselves in hip-hop pedagogies and improve the educational outcomes for students who have been previously marginalized.

The setting was familiar. It was language arts period in an eighth-grade classroom in a midsize urban city. The class was composed of approximately forty students with two teachers teaming to deliver instruction. In an earnest attempt to make the lesson interesting and relevant to their class of mostly black students from low-income households, the two White, middle-class instructors had created a lesson about persuasive writing, but they substituted the generic prompts in the scripted curriculum with “Who is the best rapper of all time, and why?” As the lesson unfolded, the students buzzed with what appeared to be excitement about a departure from the normal lecture and drill format they were accustomed to.

Students began exchanging names of their favorite artists and songs, and a few began playfully giving feedback about what they perceived to be the value of what was shared. At this point, the instructional team seemed uneasy with how the lesson was unfolding and reeled the class back in by reprimanding those talking. They scolded students into quietly looking at the speaker and warned them with a vaguely threatening statement to end such entertaining and personally relevant activities. The students eventually returned to a mostly disengaged posture, and the lesson continued in its teacher directed pattern.

“Bitch, Don’t Kill My Vibe!”: these popular lyrics from musical artist Kendrick Lamar’s 2012 hit of the same name seems like a straightforward enough request: respect our youth and allow them the freedom to express themselves however they feel most comfortable. Across the country, however, students from non-dominant backgrounds are subjected to just the opposite when they are asked to check their identities at the door and conform to dominant forms of communicating and acting. Despite a rising number of well-intentioned educators espousing the value of implementing culturally responsive pedagogies (Ladson-Billings, 1995) and spending a considerable amount of time in professional development working on improving the outcomes for students of color, there are still atrocious inequities in terms of seclusion and restraint practices, segregated special education placements, and suspension and expulsion for African-American learners (Ferguson, 2001; Harry & Klingner, 2014; Lewis, 2003).

One of the literacy tools teachers have been increasingly turning towards to address these inequities is *Hip-Hop Pedagogy* (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2000; Hill, 2009). For good reason, it has the potential to be a liberatory space for previously marginalized students. However, we must exercise caution and be diligent about the way these practices are approached because adopting hip-hop literacies also has the potential to further disenfranchise students if appropriated superficially (Hill, 2009). I suggest that it is possible for all teachers--even White, middle-class folks--to take measures to increase the likelihood that their implementation of hip-hop pedagogies go beyond the shallow to empower *all* of their students.

Due at least in part to the skyrocketing mainstream popularity of hip-hop music from the 1990s onward (Rose, 2008), as well as commercially successful Hollywood-produced films such as *Freedom Writers* or *The Ron Clark Story* featuring “heroic” White teachers using hip-hop music to relate to their inner-city black students, the idea of using rap music in the classroom is at least somewhat familiar. Another source of popular culture that normalizes the connection between traditional academics and freestyle rhyming is the “viral video” trend of filming a teacher “rapping” about curricular content during an academic period. As a testament to just how prolific this type of footage is, a quick Google search of the term “teacher rap” results in more than 2.5 *million* video results.

The swarms of copycat teachers doing their best impressions of history "freestyling" or the especially cringe-worthy math raps become a great entry point to a discussion about the tension between authenticity and superficiality inherent to those using their positions of power to mimic spoken-word performance artists. Well intentioned or not, teachers who attempt to replicate what they have seen in a feel-good movie or trending video clip are not necessarily representing any degree of authentic respect for their students' cultures. Without a genuine respect underlying these approaches, it is highly unlikely these efforts will be appreciated by the students comprising the audiences of these ambitious educators.

"Realness" (Hill, 2009, p. 33) is a word used among hip-hop participants to describe a person's degree of authenticity. In the history of hip-hop culture, being considered "fake" (as opposed to "real") can have serious consequences to a person's reputation and, consequently, to their ability to be fully accepted within that culture. In the video clips highlighted above, one would be hard pressed to make a convincing argument that the teachers featured demonstrated "realness." These White teachers made exaggerated movements with their bodies, dropped their voices while using vocabulary stereotypically attached to Black culture, and altered their appearances to cartoonish proportions, all while prominently displaying a telling smirk towards the cameras capturing every moment for later uploading. Despite the laughter these actors received, I would argue that these moments of appropriation run a serious risk of alienating many of the students within those laughing masses.

Consider for a moment the perspective of a student who is a "real" believer in the power of hip-hop music to resist oppression. How would it feel to be this student as your White, middle-class teacher makes a mockery of this art form by "putting on" a persona of the stereotypical "rapper"? Within the context of teacher-student interactions, the difference in power between these actors cannot be ignored (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008). In understanding why students, most whom have daily encounters with marginalization and oppressive forces, would laugh at such performances from their teachers, it is important to recognize there might be significant backlash for any students openly unreceptive to their teacher's buffoonery. Even though our hip-hop believer may be offended, hurt, and

annoyed that a teacher thought it acceptable to behave as though hip-hop is something to be ridiculed, it might be easier for this student to “go with the flow” instead of resisting and therefore becoming a target for the label of “troublemaker.”

Lest this paper delve too deeply into negative examples of teachers *not* being “real,” I will state clearly that there are many ways in which teachers (yes, even White, middle-class educators) can participate *authentically* in hip-hop performances. One such example was shared with a graduate class I was a member of at the time of this writing. My professor shared with us a brief video clip of one of her previous student teachers, which was filmed on this teacher-in-training’s last day. This woman (who also happened to appear White and to be from a middle-class background) proceeded to recite spoken word poetry (aka “rapping”) to her classroom of mostly black and brown students, many of whom have also been labeled “low-income.” Other than mirroring the contrasts between teacher and students in terms of basic demographic identifiers, there were not many similarities between these performances.

Whereas the “viral” acts from the men were centered around academic subjects, namely history and geometry, this educator’s lyrics were about the personal growth she experienced in her time as these students’ teacher. Where the YouTubers dressed in ridiculous costumes and purposely altered their voices, this woman performed as only herself. In the earlier renditions, hypermasculinity and the guise of humor shielded the teachers from risk of rejection from the class. In this anecdote, the young teacher was as vulnerable as could be, even allowing herself to be choked up with emotions at certain points in the performance. The first two examples resulted in students laughing and adults in the front of the room basking in the extra attention they seemed to be seeking. In the last one, the students sat, mostly quietly, in what appeared to be a respectful appreciation for their teacher’s humble gift.

Much of what this last educator did is in line with the pioneering work done by Ladson-Billings (1995) surrounding culturally responsive pedagogy. Her research into what it was that excellent teachers of African-American students were doing has made a pronounced impact on teacher development practices. This work helped teachers from all over the

world shift their thinking about children from a deficit-based to an asset-based mindset (Paris & Alim, 2014). The three major points Ladson-Billings (2014) reported from her discoveries about what these amazing teachers had in common were a collective emphasis on 1) academic success, 2) cultural competence, and 3) sociopolitical consciousness.

To demonstrate how each of these components of good teaching can be authentically incorporated into hip-hop pedagogy, allow me to share an example from my own teaching practice that I feel captures the spirit of these domains. A few years ago, I was employed as a cross-categorical special education teacher in a neighboring suburb to the city described in the opening vignette. Since we have already established the importance of context and power dynamics in time and space (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008), I will confirm that I am a White, middle-class male. The student I am going to highlight in this anecdote is an elementary school-aged African-American male that could be said to be living at a fairly pronounced poverty level. This student had experienced a tragic amount of marginalization and disenfranchisement early in his schooling and endured many barriers to his success at school. All that being said, he and I got along famously and shared an undeniably strong bond. I believe one of the pivotal moments in the early stages of our trusting relationship was when hip-hop pedagogy worked as a third space (Gutiérrez, Baquedano-Lopez, & Tejeda, 1999) for this student and I to bond. In addition to simply being a fun activity of mutual interest to both of us, I argue there are clear ways in which hip-hop music served as an authentic way for this student and I to engage in culturally relevant pedagogy.

In terms of *academic success*, this learner had experienced numerous years of low expectations, deficit-based perceptions, and hostile punitive measures from his school by the time I began to work with him. These oppressive forces combined to limit the opportunities for him to experience success in his academic pursuits, which led to an increased resistance from him to participate in academic activities, which then led to a downward spiral back to lower expectations. This witty and perceptive student knew less than half of his alphabet letter names or sounds and could correctly read around five sight words when I began working with him as a third grader. Then entered the beautifully

motivating force of hip-hop to the equation and things drastically improved. One song in particular, “I Can” by Nas (2002), was revolutionary to the trajectory of his learning.

He and I (and I suspect many others as well) found this song to be incredibly uplifting, with a catchy chorus, positive message, and “real” take on life’s challenges for urban youth of color. My learner was so engrossed with this song that he fairly quickly had many portions of this song memorized. This was where I was able to capitalize on his interests and challenge him to respond to raised expectations. As I said, he was previously able to identify approximately five of the most basic sight words in the Kindergarten vocabulary. He also demonstrated an impressive array of challenging behaviors to avoid even looking at anything resembling sight words. Both of those limitations were obliterated when he and I printed off and cut out the lyrics to the chorus of “I Can.” Not only was he interested in practicing reading these words, but he was also quickly successful in arranging these words in the correct order. His sight word vocabulary tripled within a week of introducing this activity.

I would also argue that this same activity demonstrated *cultural competence* on my part in my ability to select a song/literacy activity that was genuinely motivating. If my interest in hip-hop was superficially limited to exclusively songs from the top-40 radio hits, it’s unlikely I would have known about a song as impactful as “I Can.” I would also argue that I was successful in getting this young scholar to engage in reading because I had knowledge (i.e., cultural competence) of his history of marginalization and disenfranchisement. By hearing out his frustrations, I was able to gain a clearer understanding about why traditional approaches to literacy upset him. My approach to incorporating hip-hop music with my student was based on my knowledge of his personal interests and *not* an assumption that all Black youth will respond positively to hip-hop. It would be entirely counter to all I have learned about *cultural competence* to make educational decisions based on stereotypes.

Lastly, this same song was also the perfect vehicle to infuse the last domain of culturally relevant pedagogy, *sociopolitical consciousness*. In seeking a valid way to use hip-hop pedagogy to empower my student, he and I co-discovered a way for him to make a positive

influence on his school environment through his favorite hip-hop song. In the “I Can” music video a variety of resilient and happy children proudly dance and sing along to the chorus. My student decided that a great way to improve his school experience would be to spread that message. A plan was hatched to shoot a local version of the video, recreated entirely with students and staff from our school. I’m proud to say this project was a smashing success. My student spent weeks planning, rehearsing, directing, and editing his vision, which culminated in a video release party where he shared his precious final product.

It is plain to see through this example of what I view to be successful hip-hop pedagogy, that a standardized curriculum could never come close to approaching the flexibility needed for success to be found for this student. Fortunately, there is growing recognition that we need to consider alternatives to the status quo in education. One such author pushing this envelope is Emdin (2016), who wrote about connecting to inner-city youth of color with what he refers to as “reality pedagogy,” which he defines as “an approach to teaching and learning that has a primary goal of meeting each student on his or her cultural and emotional turf” (p. 27). In a similar but distinct vein, Hill (2009) has specifically explored “hip-hop pedagogies,” which he defines as “an alternate, more expansive vision of pedagogy that reconsiders the relationships among students, teachers, texts, schools, and the broader social world” (p. 120). There are numerous other scholars raising awareness about the incredible potential that hip-hop pedagogies offer to not only recognizing but also challenging the oppressive structures of schooling (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Paris & Alim, 2014). However, a critical point that must be clearly made here is that superficial attempts to “do hip-hop” in classrooms will actually *reinforce* these very structures we are trying to dismantle.

Part of the problem may be that hip-hop culture itself is threatening to those in power. In a paper presented at the American Educational Research Association, Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2000) explained that “In blaming majority society, however, hip-hop artists often incur the wrath of these major institutions that view them as a threat to society for the subversive nature of their lyrics” (p. 13). These “subversive lyrics” place many well-intentioned “outsiders” from hip-hop culture in a tough spot as they lead their classrooms.

Specific content or vocabulary terms are quickly going to alert teachers accustomed to the existing structures of our public schools. A song featuring curse words, such as the title of this very piece, is not likely to be deemed appropriate for discussion in a public K-12 classroom.

Therein lies the dilemma for educators not genuinely committed to a hip-hop philosophy embracing resistance: if teachers lacking the cultural competence to authentically engage in hip-hop pedagogy try to include incomplete aspects of this practice, at some point they are likely to encounter words, ideas, and attitudes that run counter to existing school norms. If they then exercise their position of authority to censor or discipline members of their classroom community, they have now further legitimized the very structures of oppression that they were trying to avoid by embracing a new approach to instruction.

Insecure classroom leaders may feel as though their only options are to reject hip-hop pedagogies altogether and stick with the familiar status quo, or to make some fragmented attempt to use hip-hop pedagogy while policing those activities with the existing structures of domination clearly incompatible with the spirit of hip-hop empowerment. I believe neither of those choices is the path we should choose. I instead challenge all compassionate educators dedicating themselves to building a more just future to fundamentally re-examine the structures we have been operating within. I say it is time to follow the lead of impassioned researchers in fully embracing a different approach to teaching than the one we were educated with. Perhaps more importantly than that, let's follow the lead of our students whose voices have previously been marginalized in redefining how to best disrupt those systems of oppression. After all, the last thing we want to do is *kill their vibes!*

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