

# Using Elements of Hip Hop to Promote Student Engagement

Edward McDaniel Jr.

**Abstract:** Incorporating hip-hop into the classroom is an effective way to increase the engagement of students, especially in urban schools. The use of hip-hop in education has become more popular in recent years and is a tool that can potentially benefit many teachers. Several studies were looked at that showed positive outcomes when teachers communicated and interacted with their students in a culturally congruent manner. By incorporating hip-hop while student teaching, the author observed a noticeable increase in student engagement.

## Introduction

*Ms. Emcee is an 8th grade English teacher in a predominantly African-American school. She has been reading articles on the effectiveness of using hip-hop in the classroom to motivate students and to increase academic performance. Prior to reading materials about hip-hop and African American culture, Ms. Emcee frequently dismissed the cultural relevance of hip-hop and often corrected students' "broken English." However, she noticed that no matter the number of times she corrected the students' speech, they ultimately reverted back to the "incorrect usage."*

*Ms. Emcee usually began her class with a warm up activity. Lately she noticed that her students seemed unenthused and their engagement was limited so she decided to try a different approach. "Good morning, class. Today we will forego the warm up and I would like to spend the first few minutes of class teaching you a chant that I think will be helpful. After you have learned the chant and are comfortable with saying it, I would like to begin each day and conclude each day with a recitation of this chant." She explained the purpose of the chant, gave detailed instructions, and then led the class in the following chant:*

*Student: "Ms. Emcee."*

*Mrs. Emcee: "Yes, student?"*

*Student: "Whose world is this?"*

*Mrs. Emcee: "The world is yours, the world is yours!"*

*Whole class: "It's mine, it's mine, it's mine!"*

*Mrs. Emcee: "Whose world is this? It's yours."*

*Whole class: "It's mine, it's mine, it's mine."*

This chant was easy for the students to catch onto because it is derived from the lyrics of a classic hip-hop song called "The World is Yours" by Nasir Jones.

The song was released in 1994 and still resonates with people of all ages who have an appreciation for hip-hop. The students were able to recognize it immediately when Ms. Emcee presented it to them and so they caught on quickly and were very motivated to chant it loudly.

## What is Hip-Hop?

During the 1970s, DJ Kool Herc began expressing himself through hip-hop music. He was living in the Bronx where hip-hop became an outlet for all of the social struggles that many were facing. By the 1980s, hip-hop was a part of the mainstream culture in the United States. In the late 1980s, groups like Native Tongues were strongly using hip-hop as a way to express their relationship to the sociopolitical climate. For example, the group NWA (Niggaz Wit Attitudes) put out a “gangsta” rap album entitled “Straight Outta Compton.” (Lightning Guides, 2015).

Jenkins (2011) argued that knowledge and mental power do not seem to be respected aspects of hip-hop within the popular culture. Discussions about hip-hop in our culture almost never include how smart and clever the artists are. The way that the intelligence of hip-hop artists is ignored seems to be a small example of how the experiences and viewpoints of African-American men in general are essentially disregarded by our society. In other words, the fact that the abilities of verbose and brilliant hip-hop artists are ignored is just a microcosm of a larger problem in that African American males are devalued in classrooms and American society as a whole (Jenkins, 2011).

At the same time, according to Bridges (2011), hip-hop has gained some popularity in education in city schools. Teaching has taken ideas and elements from popular culture as a means to help with instruction for decades. Bridges discusses the increase in popularity of using hip-hop in the classroom in his article “Towards a Pedagogy of Hip-Hop in Urban Teaching Education.” This increase is likely due to the need to find new ways to help Black students who are struggling academically. Bridges looked at three different “organizing principles” that come from hip-hop culture that include “call to service, commitment to self-awareness, and resistance to social injustice.” He found that these principles existed when looking at the relationship between hip-hop music, pedagogy and styles of teaching used by educators in urban settings.

## Hip-Hop in Real Time Root Words and Poetry

I completed my student teaching at a K-8 school in Toledo. As part of our curriculum we reviewed Greek and Latin roots. The root at this particular time was “port.” It was evident that the students were bored with their current routine and I felt that they were capable of so much more. I decided to try a different approach and I wrote the following to a Tupac instrumental:

*Gather around class, let's explore and dig deep, the root "PORT" meaning "CARRY" words for this week, we'll start it off with TRANSPORT, to take or carry people or goods from one place to another, by means of transportation...plugged up my mic, and*

*then I laced this...who can now, define PORTABLE? "I can, it means easy to carry or move around...there's other words that we need to study, like DEPORT which means to force, a person who is not citizen, to leave a country...behold the flipside as I pick my, next words to teach folks, which is IMPORT, meaning to bring a, product into a, country to be sold...here's something I engage in from time to time, When I exercise my mind, it allows me to TELEPORT an imaginary phenomenon, in which a person or object is moved across a distance instantly, knowledge is priceless, and since I know this, you won't get charged, for these poetic bars I've kick for free, the only thing that I ask that you give to me, a passing grade to do that study intensively.*

When my mentor teacher played the recording for the students, they perked up, were bobbing their heads to the beat, and were clearly listening to the lyrics. Several students turned and looked at me and asked with excitement, "Is that REALLY you, Mr. McDaniel?" They seemed shocked that a teacher was capable of putting a hip-hop song together that they would enjoy.

All of the students had Google accounts that were used for sharing assignments and materials with the class. My mentor teacher uploaded the song to their accounts so they could use it to study. She also proposed that if anyone could write their own hip-hop song using the root words and perform it for the class, it would serve as a formative assessment instead of taking the written exam. Their music teacher decided to use my song as a lesson in her class as well. Students in other classes began approaching me and asking, "Did you REALLY write that song? You got bars!"

Another example of using hip-hop in the classroom came when I had my students watch a video of a spoken word artist who performed at a TED Talk event. Throughout the year we had watched a lot of TED Talk videos and students were relatively familiar with the platform. This particular TED Talk was called "Infuse and Inspire" and the artist delivered a very captivating performance of one of his poems.

Students were mesmerized by the performance and expressed that they had really enjoyed the video. I distributed note cards and posed the question "if you could speak to this young man what is one question you would ask him?" After every student turned in their note card we proceeded with our reading for that day. The surprise that was to come later in the week was that I had made arrangements for the performer from the video to come to the school as a guest speaker.

The only information I gave my students was that we were scheduled to have a guest speaker on Thursday. I never mentioned that it would be the man from the video or that he was a good friend of mine. When he came into the classroom, the students were very surprised and instantly engaged when they made the connection that he was the performer from the Ted Talk video.

Mr. Martinez led the class in a discussion on spoken word poetry, haikus, rhyme schemes, and provided some interesting facts about the poet Paul Laurence Dunbar. He then had the students write haikus and encouraged them to share their poems with the class. I was surprised to find some of my students who typically underperformed in class really became immersed in the activity and produced some really impressive poems.

Mr. Martinez went on to perform several of his pieces for the students and shared videos of young people their age reciting poems at open mic venues. Since Mr. Martinez's poetry is very personal and autobiographical in nature, I used a similar format to conclude the lesson on poetry. I had the students write biographical poems with the following example to help guide their writing:

Your first name \_\_\_\_\_

4 adjectives that describe you \_\_\_\_\_

Son or daughter of \_\_\_\_\_

Lover of (3 people or things you love) \_\_\_\_\_

Who feels (3 feelings you have) \_\_\_\_\_

Who needs (3 things you need ex. More freedom, sleep, money, etc.) \_\_\_\_\_

Who gives (3 things you give ex. Time, a shoulder to lean on) \_\_\_\_\_

Who fears (Three fears you have) \_\_\_\_\_

Who would like to see (3 things you would like to see) \_\_\_\_\_

Who lives (The city where you live) \_\_\_\_\_

Your last name \_\_\_\_\_

The entire class applauded and thanked Mr. Martinez for his time and for teaching them about spoken word poetry. After Mr. Martinez had left the room, I asked the students what they thought about the day's events. They very enthusiastically shared that they had really enjoyed themselves. One student asked, "Mr. McDaniel, why don't we do more stuff like this?"

### **Why Should Teachers Use Hip-Hop in the Classroom?**

There need to be changes to the way in which our society views knowledge in order to reflect the viewpoints of minorities. In order to do so, we must first acknowledge that racial minorities have a perception that is based on their historical experiences of being downgraded and disregarded in our society. An important way to recognize the viewpoints of minorities is to listen to their stories about their experiences. Hip-hop is great vehicle for creating both thinkers and writers, which is beyond what most schools have done for minority students (Jenkins, 2011).

Gloria Ladson-Billings' book *Dreamkeepers* (2009) offers excellent examples of how to teach African-American students and models how to use the theories derived from her research to make improvements. Ladson-Billings contends that the pedagogical instruction that most teachers who work with African-American students get is subpar and comes from outdated ideas. In order to really succeed in the classrooms, teachers need to go down a different path that truly allows them to help their students achieve success. Within the last few years there have been more

people examining just how to help students who are racially and linguistically diverse grow in their academics. Ladson-Billings argues that it is important for teachers to communicate and interact with their students in a way that is “culturally congruent.” She defines cultural congruency as speaking and communicating in styles and patterns that look like the culture of the students.

Morrell and Duncan-Andrade (2002) discuss their experiences teaching in an urban high school and seeing the positive effects of hip-hop music being incorporated in the classrooms in their article “Promoting Academic Literacy with Urban Youth Through Engaging Hip-Hop Culture.” Not only did they find that the use of hip-hop impacted the students of color, but it seemed to be an effective tool for all students, regardless of their race or ethnicity. They found that hip-hop was able to help students develop strong literacy and increase their critical consciousness.

Their article further discussed how hip-hop music was created by urban residents and therefore offers something to which the students can relate. Hip-hop came from inside the city and illuminates urban citizens’ desires and dreams. In fact, every issue that most students in urban schools face is likely represented somewhere in hip-hop. Some hip-hop artists even view themselves as educators and strive to build consciousness within their community. By increasing their critical consciousness, the oppressed can make movement towards developing literacy and eventually freeing themselves from their oppression, and this is true not only of hip hop artists but students as well (Morrell and Duncan-Andrade, 2002).

## Conclusion

It is evident that hip-hop is a tool that can be used in classrooms to increase student involvement and their level of enthusiasm. There are endless ways that teachers can incorporate hip-hop into their lessons and they can customize it to fit their teaching styles. Teachers who are less familiar with hip-hop can simply start using hip-hop chants to help motivate and encourage their students. Teachers who are more comfortable can start incorporating hip-hop into their lessons by having the students read and write lyrics with their vocabulary words. Regardless of how hip-hop is used in the classroom, it can have positive effects for both the teachers and the students, and can not only make learning fun, but can also increase its relevance and value.

## References

- Bridges, T. (2011). Towards a pedagogy of hip hop in urban teacher education. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 80(3), 325-338.
- Jenkins, T.S. (2011). A beautiful mind: Black male intellectual identity and hip-hop culture. *Journal of Black Studies*, 42(8), 1231-1251.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (2009). *The dream-keepers: Successful teachers of African-American children*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Lightning guides. (2015). *Voices of black America*. Berkeley, CA: Author.
- Morrell, E. & Duncan-Andrade, M.R. (2002). Promoting academic literacy with urban youth through engaging hip-hop culture. *English Journal*, 91(6), 88-92.



**About the Author**

Ed McDaniel Jr. holds a Master of Education from the University of Toledo. He received a Bachelor of Science in Business Management from Wilberforce University. As of fall 2017, Ed teaches 4th and 5th grade ELA and social studies at Toledo Smart Bilingual Elementary School in Toledo.