REVIEW

Hip-hop as a resource for understanding the urban context

A review of Christopher Edmin's: Science education for the hip-hop generation, Sense Publishers, Rotterdam, 2010

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Abstract This review explores Edmin's "Science education for the hip-hop generation" by documenting how he frames hip-hop as a means to access urban student culture. He argues that hip-hop is more than a mere music genre, but rather a culture that provides young people with ways of connecting to the world. Two primary ideas emerged as central to his work. First, he contends that students develop communal relationships and collective identities based on the common experiences expressed in hip-hop. Second, he identifies how the conscious recognition of institutional oppression serves a central feature in urban schools. Emdin's rich, and personal call for a greater understanding of hip-hop culture provides the text with an unmatched strength. He skillfully uses personal narratives from his own experience as well as quotes and references from hip-hop songs to make the nuances of hip hop transparent to science educators. Conversely, the limitation of this text is found in its unfulfilled promise to provide pragmatic examples of how to engage in a hip-hop based science education. Emdin's work is ultimately valuable as it extends our current knowledge about urban students and hip-hop in meaningful ways.

Keywords Hip-hop · Urban schools · Teacher training

Hip-hop is an American phenomenon that has changed the landscape of popular culture for over 40 years. Although "hip-hop" is generally used as a referent to urban music that replaces singing with poetical prose, it has emerged as a framework of understanding youth culture between 1979 and 2010. The common activities of hip-hop include DJing, Rapping, Dancing, and Grafitti art. Those cultural activities have opened the doors for political thinking and cultural behaviors that can be consider "hip-hop". Its implications for educational research and practice have largely remained in the realm of literacy studies (Hull and Schultz 2001). In particular, an area of research that explores the continuities between the literacy practices of hip hop (writing rhymes and poetry) known as 'new literacy

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studies' provided scholars with a foundation to build an understanding of the educational value of hip-hop culture (e.g., Morrell and Duncan-Andrade 2002).

The challenge in transferring new literacy studies and hip-hop into science education is that science education and its connection to the popular cultural practices of hip-hop have remained invisible in science education research. Christopher Emdin's (2010) *Science education for the hip-hop generation* attempts to fill the void in that research by building a bridge between two seemingly disconnected areas of research; hip-hop and science education.

Emdin extends the thinking about hip-hop beyond merely identifying the relationship between similar modes of communication towards an understanding of how students' hip-hop identity was embedded in hip-hop culture itself. Early in his text Emdin defines hip-hop as a framework of cultural expression and resistance. He captures its dynamic nature by describing its social critique, playfulness, and creativity. What remains central to his work is understanding that, for urban youth, hip-hop is more than a mere music genre, but rather a culture that provides young people with ways of connecting to the world. For example, Emdin frames participation in hip-hop culture as a way for students to symbolically represent the culture itself.

> When I refer to hip-hop, or when students in urban communities refer to it, it is not seen as a title or label. Urban youth see themselves as hip-hop. My research indicates that urban youth, who are marginalized from achievement in science, see themselves as not only participants in hip-hop, but as a living embodiment of the culture (p. 12)

As such, use of the traditional ways of being a member of the hip-hop community serves as a rights of passage for those who adopt the culture. It also, provides youth with a way of recognizing their own.

As such, Emdin's (2010) *Science education for the hip-hop generation* challenges teachers to recognize the orienting power of building continuities between hip-hop culture and the way we teach science. In making this point, Emdin offers an analysis of how the culture of hip-hop serves to coalesce young people into group membership.

> The cosmopolitan nature of hip-hop includes people from backgrounds other than Black American and makes it clear that in hip-hop, one's kin are not just those related by blood, but those related by experience. This is particularly the case if the shared experience is of oppression at the hands of the same institutions and the same political and social economies that exclude a particular set of people from fully participating in the activities within a particular social field (p. 46).

There are two striking insights that emerge from his analysis. First, the idea that students develop communal relationships and collective identities based on the common experiences expressed in hip-hop culture and expressed in hip-hop music. This is an important point in that it identifies how participating in the hip-hop culture transcends race. If urban students find there lives portrayed in this culture, it logically follows that teaching science in the context of these expressions could coalesce students' identities around pertinent science experiences in the same way. Second, if a prominent theme that emerges in hip-hop involves the conscious recognition of institutional oppression then schools must recognize that urban schools can be viewed as this source of oppression. Conversely, an adoption of Emdin's perspective would suggest that bringing hip-hop into the classroom could serve as the very point of entry for those who have traditionally been cast as outsiders.

It is the second point that stands as central to the text. The author challenges contemporary perspectives on science education by arguing that urban students are largely

misunderstood because teachers do not understand hip-hop culture. He argues that teacher and teacher training programs misunderstand how to access students' culture through using the benefits embedded in hip-hop culture itself. To explain this he outlines in vision of science teaching with respect to hip-hop culture.

> The teaching and research approach that I call for, which involves a process of learning and or utilizing the complex nuances of communication in hip-hop and a valuing of student culture, is far removed from the scientifically verifiable approach to pedagogy that is currently in place and that I discussed earlier in this chapter. In fact, it requires a process where constant exchange with students is necessary and conclusions about what is working in the classroom are consistently formed and reformed (p. 62).

It is Emdin's rich, and personal call for a greater understanding of hip-hop culture that provides the text its strength. He skillfully uses personal narratives from his own experience as well as quotes and references from hip-hop songs to make the nuances of hip hop transparent to those who may be unfamiliar. He makes a compelling case to recast hip-hop as an asset as opposed to it being viewed as a culture to be overcome. He calls scholars to challenge the narrow application of hip-hop and its communicative practices by suggesting that hip-hop be viewed as the corner stone to building urban instruction. He explains how failure to do this will highlight the deficiencies of urban education and urban science education in particular.

By contrast, the limitation of this text is found in its unfulfilled promise to provide pragmatic examples of how to engage in a hip-hop based science education. Although the book provides a rich entrée into understanding how hip-hop impacts students' experiences in science, it has a long way to go in providing specific details about what particular practices are associated with hip-hop culture. To move this line of research and inquiry forward, this work will need to offer educators tangible examples of practices that effectively incorporate hip-hop into the teaching of science.

Despite this limitation, Emdin's work extends our current knowledge in meaningful ways. It does an incredible job of making the subtle nuances of hip-hop culture visible to educators and casts hip-hop in a new role; that of an asset. Ultimately, Emdin's (2010) *Science education for the hip-hop generation* is a book that should be widely read by all scholars who engage in urban education. The depth, insight, and detail of this text have much to offer and should be commended.

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Author Biography

Bryan A. Brown is an assistant professor of education at Stanford University. His research focuses on the relationship between minority students' language practices and identities, and classroom learning. Recently his work explored how applying a theoretical lens that applies the notion of discursive identity to classroom

learning would help scholars gain insights regarding the impact of language on students' identity and classroom learning. Bryan explores students' perception of the role of science discourse and its impact on their sense of belonging. Overall, his work examines how the discourse practices of teachers and students impact classroom learning.