

# Hip Hop as Critical Pedagogy: Re-Imagining Education

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*Abstract: Hip hop as a form of Black popular culture can help to create opportunities to generate new knowledge on how to re-imagine a culturally sustaining pedagogy for Black youth. In this literature review, I examine hip hop as an example of critical pedagogy that can be used to reframe and re-imagine learning and actively addresses the various forms of systemic racism and anti-Black oppression. Research has explored the impact of hip hop on youth's identity construction. Less research explores hip hop as a form of critical pedagogy. I draw on participatory methods to inquire how they are used to radically re-imagine a culturally sustaining and empowering vision. As critical pedagogy, hip hop can become a text and curriculum for revolutionary and transformative opportunities to critically interrogate intersecting forms of systemic racism while opening spaces for new generative learning by and for Black youth.*

*Keywords: hip hop, Black popular culture, critical pedagogy, culturally sustaining pedagogy, Black youth, marginalized students*

## Background

Research consistently points to the hegemonic construction of school policies and curricula that routinely ignores the diverse identities, cultural backgrounds, and forms of expression among Black youth (Campbell, 2010; Varelas, 2012). Schools more broadly develop pedagogy rooted in deficit thinking that undervalues the cultural capital of marginalized students. Yosso (2005) suggests that “race is often coded as ‘cultural difference’” (p. 75), and therefore schools do not value the cultural wealth Black and racialized students bring with them into dominant schooling contexts. Disparities such as systemic racism, classism, streaming, limited access to academic supports that disproportionately affect Black and racialized students, inattention to the cultural well-being of marginalized students, and conscious and unconscious bias (James, 2020; Rykert, 2017) attract attention to the urgent need to understand Black youth's experiences and re-imagine culturally sustaining and accessible schooling. Incorporating hip hop into the curricula is an example of an innovative approach that critical scholars use to attend to the cultural well-being of students, raise their voice and agency, and empower Black youth (Adjapong & Emdin, 2015; Alim & Haupt, 2017; Kruse, 2016a).

Hip hop, as one form of Black popular cultural expression, refers more broadly to an attitude, awareness, and worldview that articulates the lived Black experience (Low, 2011). Black popular culture is described as everyday habits that inform and shape the Black experience. Hip hop includes multiple forms of Black cultural expression within this context, such as music, dance, spoken word poetry, or art (Ibrahim, 2020; Walcott, 2018) that are sites of representation, identification, production, and consumption (Campbell, 2010; Gilroy, 1993; Ibrahim, 2020; Nelson, 2010; Walcott, 2010). These cultural forms of expression are integral aspects of the lives of marginalized youth as they mirror their cultural background, interests, concerns, and everyday experience. They also create opportunities for Black youth to talk to each other and connect with their authentic cultural selves. Educators can unpack the cultural meaning through various cultural expressions to support students in the classroom.

Within the educational context, Black popular culture provides an understanding of the lived experience of Black youth and how they make meaning of hegemonic schooling contexts. Critical pedagogy allows us to create educational opportunities for marginalized youths to interrogate dominant discourses and structures that oppress them, thereby allowing them to develop a state of critical consciousness. This sense of awareness provides a means for marginalized youths to evaluate their social condition using a flexible and wide-ranging analysis that accounts for the multiple intersecting facets that affect their lives (Guishard, 2008). Hip hop as a form of Black popular culture can be used as a form of critical pedagogy and become a transformative space for Black youth to speak to their Black experiences in multiple forms of expression (Emdin, 2016; Kruse, 2020; Macdonald, 2012; Parris, 2016).

With reference to literature that uses co-teaching, which is related to hip hop culture (Adjapong & Emdin, 2015), and youth participatory methods (YPAR; Cammarota & Fine, 2008), I examine hip hop, such as dance, music, art, and spoken word poetry as an alternative educational space that engages with and supports Black youth's meaning-making toward an identity of belonging. I emphasize a more humanizing approach to pedagogical practices. Viola and Porfilio (2012) suggest that hip hop as a Black cultural expression “offers a powerful cultural

form, a vocabulary, and a method for crafting resistant worldviews that speak to questions of racialization, dispossession, imperialism, and subjugation” (p. 6). As such, I suggest that Black youth who engage in hip hop as critical pedagogy can gain greater strength and resilience in advocating for their education.

## Conceptual Frames

Critical theories of race, racism, and anti-Blackness give attention to the everyday practices, experiences, and habits of Black life that inform and shape the fluidity of the Black experience (Gates, 2018; Hall, 1992; hooks, 1992; Walcott, 2018). They provide a lens to “critically evaluate issues of racism in education and propose ways to address it... [and to understand] the complexities of racism” (Campbell, 2020, p. 15). Critical race scholars have long called for a critical examination of the achievement gap based on race and advocate for alternative pedagogies that address the needs of marginalized students (Horsford & Grosland, 2013; James, 2011; Ladson-Billings, 2006). Critical theories of race and racism operate from an understanding that hip hop as critical pedagogy engages Black youth to speak to their Black experiences (Childs, 2015). It guides us to understand the “interlocking relationship with gender, class, and other demographic factors, central to any social analysis” (James, 2011, p. 468). Although research has explored Black popular cultural expressions such as film, art, music, and social media in Canada and the United States (Nelson, 2010; Richardson & Pough, 2016), there is less exploring hip hop as critical pedagogy.

Critical scholars such as Freire (2012); Giroux (2004); Hall and Morley (2019); (2018); Vindevoghel (2016) view teaching as an emancipatory act from oppressive practices through an awareness of what Freire (2012) calls critical consciousness. Freire's (2012) philosophy of critical educational praxis has long been foundational for critical pedagogy. It suggests that when oppressed individuals critically reflect on their social conditions, they “acquire the ability to intervene in reality” (p. 109). As a liberatory praxis, critical pedagogy extends the concept of the construction of knowledge by looking at “the social functions of knowledge” (McLaren, 1999, p. 58). As an approach to learning, critical pedagogical practices challenge dominant norms that reinforce structural inequity in schooling and empower students to interrogate social and cultural conditions meaningful to them.

While critical theories of race, racism, and anti-Blackness allow us to decipher and probe the confluence of intersecting issues around race, racism, and Black identification (James et al., 2007), cultural analysis allows us to “examine how culture operates in the schooling experiences and outcomes of students” (James, 2011, p. 468). Black cultural forms of expression provide rich information about the historical and cultural contexts of the Black experience, identity, race, family, and gender “that have become an important part of both producing and interpreting it” (Gilroy, 1993, p. x). Hip hop, as an example of Black popular culture, is an integral aspect of the lives of marginalized youth as it mirrors their cultural background, interests, concerns, and everyday experience (Richardson & Pough, 2016). To understand the intricacies and fluidity of Blackness, Nelson (2010) suggests that we “draw on the strengths, cultural, linguistic and political of the diaspora [that] does not see itself as locked into [a single] dialogue” (p. 17). Decentering dominant narratives can help us to understand how “race, class, age, and gender intersect to alienate [Black youth] from full access to educational... opportunities” (Davis, 2017, p. 725). From a contemporary perspective, cultural analysis allows us to more broadly draw on the meanings of Black popular cultural expression to explain what Hall (1992) calls the “contradictory space” (p. 27). This idea suggests that the diversity of Black expression should not be limited to binary differences, such as black and white—but to examine the role culture plays in understanding the differences in Black expression.

The intersection of race, culture, and gender, converge in three theoretical frameworks to provide a lens for critical scholars and educators to understand how Black youth might push back against their marginalization, challenge systemic racism, and refuse dominant ideology to actively change their lives through education. A focus on hip hop as critical pedagogy provides a unique and complex understanding of the structural, cultural, and societal forces that inform Black youth experiences, identity, and aspirations inside and outside schooling contexts.

## Creating Alternative Educational Spaces

Yang and Kennedy (2020) point to the growing fear by social justice advocates that racialized youth are falling through the cracks. Critical scholars (Campbell, 2010; Davis, 2017; Walcott, 2018) argue that the dynamic nature of

the Black experience articulated through different types of Black cultural expression offers a way to understand how issues of race, class, age, and gender intersect to isolate Black youth from full participation in school and their community. These intersections manifest, among other things, in social marginalization, racial and class discrimination, and school dropout (Buffington & Day, 2018).

For example, Adjapong and Emdin (2015) use hip hop music and dance to teach concepts in a STEM class. The “call-and-response approach” (p. 72) highlights science definitions and reinforces student learning. It is built on the premise that educators should meet students on their “own cultural and emotional turf” (p. 27). The educator, in turn, becomes the learner and refuses to apply a hegemonic approach to student learning. This pedagogical strategy creates opportunities for youth to engage in classroom activities while acknowledging and respecting their knowledge. It also challenges the traditional model of teaching whereby the teacher takes a back seat allowing the student to lead the class and letting the “students know that they are not only students but teaching experts whose knowledge about how to teach has tremendous value” (Emdin, 2016, p. 89). The participatory style acknowledges and celebrates youth involvement through an apprenticeship style co-teaching approach that flips the student-teacher roles.

Focusing on how youth engage in cultural expression of identity and understanding can inspire more resonant critical scholarship and profound curiosity. By listening to science content in a musical form they engage with, students identify with it and recall the information rather than it being forced upon them. As Gilroy (1993) points out, Black cultural forms of expression provide rich information about the historical and cultural contexts of the Black experience, identity, race, family, and gender “that have become an important part of both producing and interpreting it” (Gilroy, 1993, p. x). The use of hip hop “cultural codes” (Rose, 1994, p. 100), such as vocabulary, attire, and gestures, enable Black youth to make deeper connections with science content by simultaneously stimulating their “linguistic capital” (Yosso, 2005, p. 78) and cultural capital. Adjapong’s and Emdin’s (2015) example above suggests that the students are better able to grasp scientific vocabulary and “are more likely to navigate spaces where they will need knowledge of science content to thrive” (p. 75). This approach thereby increases their learning experience. Encouraging them to navigate a familiar space “prioritizes [B]lack voices from the margins” (Rose, 1994, p. 2). Hip hop can be a powerful medium of communication within an educational context as it “continues to be a vital location of black thought” (hooks, 1992, p. 51).

Professor and critical scholar Mark V. Campbell argues that hip hop makes discussions around race and racism more accessible by speaking to social issues around race, racism, and Blackness. He further explains that “hip hop music more generally – serve[s] as a way of Black people but others as well...while also providing educators and parents access to some of these things that [they] may not have experience with” (Chhabra, 2020, para. 9). In essence, hip hop allows Black youth to speak to their social development and can assist educators in addressing social problems and inequity in school policies and practices. The pedagogical influence articulated through different representations of hip hop can be used to understand the broader complexities of Black life, such as educational aspirations, cultural belonging, and how Black youths learn about the world they navigate. According to Alim and Haupt (2017), hip hop can provide “marginalized youth with the means to reclaim, re-imagine, and reconstruct themselves and their histories, cultures, and languages” (p. 159). While hip hop arguably contains contradictory language and messages that unintentionally reproduce exclusionary conditions in the classroom, Alim and Paris (2017) suggest including culturally sustaining pedagogies by using various equity-seeking hip hop music that reveals the tensions and possibilities for practices that need revision. As they suggest, “the very real and difficult tensions found within youth cultures are not reasons to inhibit their use in schools, but rather to demand their use in the development of more critical approaches” (Alim & Paris, 2017, p. 11). Finding ways to engage, encourage, and sustain hip hop’s vibrant cultural learning opportunities while simultaneously creating safe spaces to critically assess how it may unintentionally marginalize Black youth can offer valuable insights.

Creating opportunities for youth engagement through participatory practices and education can be transformative because it strengthens Black youth’s involvement in creating stories concerning their lives. Through participatory methods, “positive change can be influenced and implemented” (Latz, 2017, p. 4). Moving Black youth from the margins to actively writing their stories about hope and positive life changes is a liberatory educational praxis. Empowering Black youth opens opportunities for the ideas of those typically silenced by

providing them with access to power (Alim & Haupt, 2017; Kinloch, 2017) while generating possibilities for engaging Black youth in a restorative process for meaning-making and belonging.

## **Hip hop as Restorative and Generating Counter-Stereotypes**

Including Black youth voices and ideas serves as an approach to reframe and re-imagine pedagogy that shifts the balance of power from restrictive and structured classroom practice and mode of teaching to an emancipatory practice of education. With a focus on Black youth participation, hip hop offers a counter-hegemonic approach that can “engage youth in democratic problem solving...to form new pedagogical possibilities” (Ginwright, 2008, p. 14). Our understanding of democratic problem-solving through youth participation can be drawn from the example of Batey Urbano Youth Center’s participatory approach to youth engagement. It exposes youth to political and cultural ideas through spoken word poetry. In one example, youths were able to bring about change by speaking to “the impact of gentrification in their community...[by documenting] the impact of gentrification, informed residents about what they could do to save their community, and joined forces with adult allies” (Ginwright, 2008, p. 20). By integrating and employing Black popular cultural forms of expression, marginalized youth could identify the issues they sought to address and improve in their urban community. As a result of their involvement, the youths were able to preserve their historic cultural site and speak out against conditions they felt were unjust.

Several scholars have suggested that to reframe and re-imagine an emancipatory type of learning requires critical educational praxis that explores the structural, cultural, and societal forces that inform youth’s experiences, identity, and aspirations inside and outside of schooling contexts (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Ginwright, 2008; Ozer, 2017). Having youth make decisions about their schooling allows them to co-create learning that meets their cultural needs (Emdin, 2016). To honour marginalized youth’s cultural capital and create opportunities to engage them meaningfully, some critical scholars argue for pedagogical approaches that integrate hip hop into the curriculum (Adjapong & Emdin, 2015; Ibrahim, 2020; Kruse, 2016b; Parris, 2016). These inclusions include integrating rap lyrics into a classroom activity and art-based exercises. Supplementing traditional texts with hip hop-based material increased student engagement, academic performance, and critical literacy development (Adjapong & Emdin, 2015; Kruse, 2016a). This alternative pedagogical strategy encourages participation by actively engaging “culturally rooted approaches to teaching” (p. 75). The adoption of restorative approaches to education provides self-expression and access to power that allows marginalized youths to engage in their education fully.

In working with marginalized youths who have been at the receiving end of exclusion and denial for too long, scholars suggest that we provoke critical discourse to envision the power of refusal in participatory research and education (Simpson, 2007; Tuck & Yang, 2014). In one of her seminal works, Simpson (2007) explains that “describing difference also involved the analysis of difference” (p. 78). She suggests that researchers and, by extension, educators can refuse to participate in degenerative models of working with marginalized groups. She argues that “refusals speak volume because they tell us when to stop” (Simpson, 2007, p. 78). Within hegemonic schooling structures, Black youth are pathologized more broadly as violent, underachieving, delinquent, academically insufficient, and resistant to schooling (Brown, 2013; Kinloch, 2017). In response to being Othered, they react to the negative gaze through gestures of refusal such as “eye-rolling, sharp verbal responses, silence, a seemingly disinterested disposition, absence, etc.” (Kinloch, 2017, p. 27), which are often misread as being problematic. However, collaborating with youths in developing pedagogical strategies that intentionally situate hip hop as one form of Black popular cultural expression affirms the cultural diversity of Black youth. Doing so can allow educators to respond to the negative stereotyped images to get deeper insights into how Black youth seek ways to restore, repair, revitalize, and regain their sense of belonging. Through youth engagement, marginalized youth can envision a space to conceptualize and express their ideas about Blackness, representation, and identity, which offers them hope for a different reality than their daily educational experience. Engaging students to co-create learning sets up a model for refusal by engaging youths to craft their educational experience through popular cultural methods noted previously.

By listening and attending to the messages explained through hip hop, educators can engage in different forms of learning and critical educational praxis that move Black youths from the margins. Culturally sustaining critical

dialogic reflexive learning strategies noted above would allow Black youth to not only speak to their struggles but empower them to speak about their interests and perspectives. Decentering the narrative can help us interrogate dominant discourses to provide an “important opportunity for intervention” (Hall, 1992, p. 23). Hip hop provides a needed emancipatory learning and critical educational praxis that generates new insights and alternative pedagogical strategies.

### **Conclusion: A Humanizing Approach**

Engaging with Black youth in meaningful ways through hip hop can help educators unpack the larger structural inequality inherent in the educational system that situates Blackness and Black cultural practices on the margin. Thereby moving away from what Wynter (1984) calls an “external observer” (p. 45) to work collaboratively toward a more humanizing approach to teacher-student interaction. Black Popular culture, such as hip hop, provides an opportunity for educators to access some of the vocabulary, cultural perspectives, and history they may not have experienced (Alim & Haupt, 2017). As Professor Mark V. Campbell mentions, hip hop can provide “the kind of public social discourse that we need to develop critical citizens” (Chhabra, 2020, para.17). Some of the issues affecting the schooling of Black youth, such as streaming, Eurocentric curriculum, and insufficient access to educational resources (James & Turner, 2017), point to systemic anti-Black racism issues that adversely affect them. Collaborating with marginalized youth to understand how they make sense of their education can help interrogate and confront the intersecting forms of systemic racism in their schools.

Hip hop music and spoken word poetry are examples of cultural expression that can be integrated into the curriculum, allowing marginalized youth to reflect on and talk about their lived experience. Low (2011), for example, describes the integration of hip hop cultural expression into the planned curriculum of a language arts course. Engaging in critical discourse and reflection on the contradictory language at times presented in these forms of expression provided an opportunity to attend to some of the controversies that outline the relationships between marginalized youth and conventional schooling. This unconventional approach provides opportunities for difficult conversations around race, culture, and identity, producing new awareness for teachers and students.

In Canada, the inclusion of hip hop as pedagogy and an expression of Black popular culture is small-scale but growing (Parris, 2016). While there remains skepticism about how to include hip hop into the curricula, a report showing the achievement gap among Black youth, high dropout rate, and continued concerns raised by Black youth regarding the lack of concern about their cultural well-being (Rykert, 2017) makes the need for out-of-the-box thinking about pedagogical approaches more pressing. Understanding the informal ways Black youth engage with hip hop can inform methods to re-imagine education and research praxis that bring positive attention to acts of resistance and refusal against systemic racism.

As critical pedagogy, hip hop can therefore become a text and curriculum for revolutionary and transformative opportunities to interrogate intersecting forms of systemic racism while opening spaces for new generative learning by and for Black youth. For example, Emdin’s (2016) use of Reality Pedagogy illustrates how Black youth might articulate identity and community outside of school by allowing them to imagine and rehearse a place of belonging that still empowers them towards meaningful education. Doing so strengthens the creation of educational spaces that promote culturally sustaining pedagogy, empower Black youth, and create opportunities for alternative spaces for shared learning.

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