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Using Hip-Hop Culture to Engage in Culturally Relevant Literacy Instruction

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Introduction

The United States is more ethically and racially diverse than it has ever been. Demographics have been gradually shifting through the years, and the Pew Research Center (2015) projects that no single ethically and racially group, in the next twenty-five years, will comprise most of the population. These changing demographics, and the current political and health challenges we are now encountering due to the coronavirus, has not left the educational landscape unscathed. Students inability to attend school due to the COVID-19 pandemic placed a spotlight on education and the inequities that exist (Garcia and Weiss, 2020). This pandemic has placed education in a position to emerge stronger and, if leveraged correctly, can chart a new path that can provide not equality, but equity to ensure the academic success of all students (Garcia and Weiss, 2020). Parents are forced to be more involved in their child's education, and this pandemic provides an opportunity for parents, teachers, and schools to rise like a phoenix from the ashes and provide an education that supports learning, addressing the needs and cultural identities of its students.

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) is the most significant national assessment of what American students know and can do in various subject areas. It assesses students in grades 4, 8, and 12 in both public and private schools across the nation (Johnson, 1992). The most recent reading data (2019 for fourth and eighth grade and 2015 for the twelfth grade) indicates the following: basic achievement level – 66 percent for fourth grade, 73 percent for eighth grade, and 72 percent for a twelfth grade; at or above proficient – 35 percent for fourth grade, 34 percent for eighth grade, and 37 percent for twelfth grade, and advanced – 9 percent for fourth grade, 4 percent for eighth grade and 6 percent for twelfth grade. Changes in percentages from 1992 to 2015 for twelfth grade and 2019 for fourth and eighth grade were minimal if there was a measurable change at all (Johnson, 1992).

The average reading scores from 1992-2019 for White fourth and eighth graders and 1992-2015 for White twelfth graders were higher than those of their Black and Hispanic counterparts (Johnson, 1992). The fourth-grade White-Black achievement gap did not change measurably from 2017 to 2019. However, for eighth graders, the White-Black achievement gap in 2019 (28 points) was higher than the White-Black achievement gap in 2017 (25 points), and the White-Black achievement gap for twelfth-grade students was more extensive in 2015 (30 points) than in 1992 (24 points) (Chetty, Hendren, Jones, Porter, 2018). The reading data shows that White students continue to outperform their Black and Hispanic peers, and the achievement gap between White and Black students has widened or shown no significant change (Chetty, Hendren, Jones, Porter, 2018). In 2014, students of color made up 47 percent of all public schools nationwide; the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) predicts the population will increase to 56 percent by 2024. Furthermore, information from NCES reported that, 13.7 million or 19 percent of children under age 18 are living in families of poverty; the poverty rate appears to be highest among African Americans, American Indian/Alaska Native children (34 percent for both groups), followed by Hispanic (28 percent), and White and Asian children (11 percent for both groups).

Changes in student demographics across the nation have created a critical vacuum for educators to effectively meet the needs of an ever-growing diverse student population through culturally responsive pedagogy. Communities need schools and classrooms to be culturally responsive using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, and learning styles of diverse learners to make learning more engaging and effective. Aronson and Laughter (2016) synthesized the characteristics of culturally responsive pedagogy and devised five key features.

Those features are: 1) educators communicate high expectations, 2) actively engage students in learning, 3) facilitate learning, 4) have a positive perspective on parents and families, and 5) help students understand how the curriculum links to their everyday lives. The Alliance for Excellent Education (2014) suggested that culturally responsive schools can assist "historically underserved and marginalized students in coping with bias, discrimination, and negative stereotypes they often face because of cultural, racial, and socioeconomic identities" by using familiar pedagogy. Using hip-hop culture in literacy instruction provides such an opportunity. Chang (2013) defined hip hop as a body of knowledge with a vast worldview more encompassing than many of its practitioners—one that students often comprehend better than their teachers.

Culturally relevant literacy instruction is grounded in a framework that involves the pedagogy of the oppressed (Freire, 1970), culturally responsive teaching pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995), and reality pedagogy (Emdin, 2011). According to Freire, the oppressed's pedagogy is a practice of freedom in education as opposed to education as domination. The notion of banking education is introduced where "knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider knowing nothing"; contrasts forms of education that treat people as objects rather than subjects and explores education as cultural action.

Ladson-Billings suggests that culturally relevant teaching must have three criteria: 1) the ability to develop students academically, 2) willingness to nurture and support cultural competence, and 3) development of a sociopolitical or critical consciousness. Culturally relevant teaching is distinguishable by three broad propositions or conceptions regarding self and others, social relations, and knowledge.

Emdin (2011) defines reality pedagogy as a teaching method that "focuses on the cultural understandings of students within a particular social space" (p. 286). Reality pedagogy is identified as the "5 C's". The "5 C's are 1) cogenerative dialogues, 2) coteaching, 3) cosmopolitanism, 4) context, and 5) content. Cogenerative dialogues are structured dialogues that build on students' hip-hop identities and familiarity with the hip-hop communal tradition of ciphers. Coteaching, in reality, pedagogy, is a role reversal of sorts and encourages students to be the "expert at pedagogy, and the teacher positioned as a novice who is learning how to teach." This method also allows teachers to study how students learn from one another in order to understand students' learning styles. A better understanding provides an opportunity for students to learn in ways that reflect their realities.

Cosmopolitanism is based on the philosophical construct that human beings are responsible for each other and that individual differences are valued. Context connects students' home-lives and culture to their classrooms through community and culture artifacts. Context provides students the opportunity to bring to the classroom artifacts that represent their authentic self and culture. Emdin writes, "students can physically see and examine artifacts both in the classrooms and in their home communities, the divides between the school world and their world broken down" (p. 291). Content involves the teacher's willingness to acknowledge his or her limitations with academic content and to explore and learn with students they are responsible for educating.

Culturally responsive literacy instruction is the instruction that bridges the gap between the school and the world of the student. It is consistent with the values of the students' own culture aimed at assuring academic learning and encourages teachers to adapt their instruction to meet the learning needs of all students. Instruction is a matter of equity and representation. A

synthesis of the literature researched suggests that providing culturally responsive literacy instruction promotes high achievement among culturally diverse students and is in line with differentiating and scaffolding instruction to meet diverse learners' needs.

Theoretical Framework

Constructivism is a theory in education that recognizes learners' understanding and knowledge based on their own experiences. It is associated with various philosophical positions, particularly in epistemology and ontology, politics, and ethics—the origin of the constructivist theory linked to Jean Piaget's theory of cognitive development. Hmelo-Silver, Duncan, and Chinn (2007), postulate that constructivism is employed when learners have prior knowledge and experiences, which are determined by their social and cultural environment. Therefore, learning done by students' is "constructing" knowledge out of experiences. One way to construct learning is by using hip-hop. Jones (2020) wrote that hip-hop can be used to teach critical thinking skills, critical literacy, media literacy skills, STEM skills, critical consciousness and more. Hip-hop can enhance active learning and teaching by communicating with each other, reflecting, understanding, knowledge, experiences, and come up with unique ways to deliver pedagogy and best literacy practices. Constructivist teaching is based on the belief that learning occurs when learners are actively involved in learning as opposed to passively receiving information. Learners are the makers of meaning and knowledge. The theory of constructivism, according to Piaget (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008), is an approach to learning, suggesting that learners construct their understanding of the world in which they live.

Hip-hop is essential and useful for learning, teaching diverse student literacy, and it helps veteran practitioners and novice teachers see what it looks like when they teach, and students learn (Broughton, 2017). Teachers and students are amazed at what the students learn from the teachers and what teachers learn from the students (Love, 2015; Emdin, 2011). The theory allows diverse learners to question, challenge, and critically analyze information rather than blindly accept what is taught. This leads to the type of teaching advocated by the originators of culturally relevant teaching.

Differentiated Instruction

To effectively teach academically and culturally diverse learners, instruction must be differentiated to meet their needs. Differentiated instruction is foundational in the discussion and practice of engaging in culturally relevant instruction. Tomlinson (1999) is renowned for work with differentiated instruction, and defines it as tailoring instruction to meet individual needs. Simply put, it is a teacher's response to learners' needs. Teachers can differentiate content – what students need to learn and/or how they will gain access to the information; process – what students will do in order to make sense of or achieve mastery of the content; products – how students will demonstrate what he or she has learned, and the learning environment – the way the classroom operates and feels. Content, process, and products can be differentiated depending on students' readiness levels, interests, and learning profiles. Teachers who differentiate recognize that culture, which can impact background knowledge, experiences, and language, play a role in students' learning (Tomlinson, 1999).

Culture influences and shapes attitudes, values, thinking, beliefs, and behavior and affects the world's interpretation and life experiences (Bates, 2015). The principles of differentiated instruction lend way to culturally relevant pedagogical practices. It allows students, particularly

students of color, to engage and explore learning through a teaching approach that best meets their needs while being aware of and sensitive to the beliefs, values, and ideas that shape their experiences.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Ladson-Billings (1994), the originator of "culturally relevant pedagogy," defined the term as "while succeeding academically, it empowers students to maintain cultural integrity." While the term often deals specifically with instruction of African American students in the United States, it proves to be an effective pedagogy for students of all racial and ethnic backgrounds (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Canadian educators wanted to bridge the gap between traditional Aboriginal education and Western education systems by including spirituality in Aboriginal educational practices (Baumgartner and Johnson-Bailey, 2008). By making education culturally relevant to have improved the academic achievement of the members of the Aboriginal culture (Curwin, 2003).

Culturally relevant pedagogy is rooted in teachers' ability to demonstrate cultural competence in diverse or multicultural environments, and it encourages students to relate course content to his or her cultural context (Scherff and Spector, 2011). Schmeichel (2012) suggest that gaps exist in academic achievement between mainstream culture and immigrants or ethnic cultural groups. The disconnect between groups is due to student and teacher language difficulties or ethnic cultures do not value education as heavily as Western culture does. More often than not, higher numbers of culturally diverse students were unnecessarily placed in special education only because of linguistic and cultural differences (Artiles and Harry, 2006). In response to the challenges, teachers started to believe that education should be adapted to the cultures students bring with them from home.

Culturally relevant pedagogy also expands traditional view of culture beyond race and ethnicity. According to Gay (2010) "even without being consciously aware of it, culture determines how we think, believe, and behave". Culture is a student's beliefs, motivations, and even social groups and norms. Any educator that practices culturally relevant pedagogy or teaching understands that culture manifests in a variety of adaptations within how students prefer to learn. Therefore, culturally responsive teachers use differentiated instruction to tailor learning to every aspect of a student's culture. Using hip-hop is one of the ways teachers can tailor learning to meet the needs of students and engage in culturally relevant pedagogy.

Hip-Hop Pedagogy

The Oxford University Press (2021) defines hip-hop as 1) a type of popular music with spoken words and a steady beat played on electronic instruments, originally played by young African Americans, and 2) as the culture of young African Americans and others who enjoy this type of music, including special styles of art, dancing, dress, etc. The phenomenon of hip-hop has changed the landscape of popular culture for the past thirty years and has influenced fashion, art, language, and politics of mainstream Western society. Hip-Hop is multifaceted as it is a resistance and social movement that promotes constructive dialogue, responding to racial and class discrimination, lack of opportunity, and chronic poverty (Hoch 2006; Peoples 2008). Hip Hop represented a "…resistance to social marginalization," and gradually developed as an active form of protest against institutional oppression (Peoples 2008, p. 23).

According to Hill (2009), there has been a growing body of scholarship that examines the intersection of hip-hop culture and classroom pedagogy, and there is an increased emphasis and high interest in critical hip-hop pedagogy. Hip-hop pedagogy is all about student engagement and is key to creating meaningful connections for students (Adjapong and Emdin, 2015). Additionally, it is a way of authentically and practically merging creative elements of hip-hop into teaching and allowing students to connect with the content while meeting on their cultural turf; this is done by teaching through the lenses of their experiences (Johnson, 2017).

The reality that hip-hop continues to be a growing presence in the classroom is obvious to any casual observer (Duncan-Andrade and Morrell, 2005). Supporting this view, Gee (1989) added the idea that culturally responsive teaching, combined with the use of culturally relevant multimedia, provides a bridge between the subculture of the student and the subculture of the school. A 2010 Kaiser Family Institute report indicates that youth between the ages of eight and eighteen spend approximately seven and a half hours per day, seven days per week using media, including television, music, video games, and books; over fifty-two hours that can be utilized to meet learners where they are and engage in culturally relevant, differentiated instruction. Aikenhead (2001) contended that teachers could use cultural brokering to help students move fluidly between their culture and mainstream culture.

Harackiewicz, Smith, Priniski (2016) postulate that leveraging culture opens doors for teachers to connect with students and to explore their culture. When teachers connect to the different students they teach, they are displaying an attitude of valuing the whole child. Students lose interest in learning when the curriculum does not reflect their culture and interests (). According to Cirelli and Sitomer (2015), utilizing hip-hop in the classroom has proven to be a game-changer for many students. The authors further denote that classrooms across the United States have been transformed from atmospheres of chronic underperformance and sleepy disengagement to purposeful, dynamic, high-achieving learning environments tapping into the proven power of hip-hop pedagogy.

Using Hip-Hop to Teach Literacy

Teachers who engage in culturally relevant pedagogy understand that culture manifests in various adaptations within how students prefer to learn and are successful (Mohd Maasuma, Maarof, & Mohd Ali, 2014). Culturally responsive teachers use differentiated instruction to tailor learning to all aspects of a student's culture, especially literacy. Because the new national academic standards are literacy expectations, many literacy teachers are finding ways to engage students more deeply in writing and reading assignments through hip-hop pedagogy (McNeil, 2016). The use of hip-hop in instruction is supported by the account of an English high school teacher and adjunct English faculty, who incorporated rap and hip-hop culture into the literacy curriculum. As a result, this phenomenon helped to connect instruction to students' backgrounds and sparked their interest in writing (McNeil, 2016). In McNeil's article, information was shared in terms of how Lauren Leigh Kelly, an English high school teacher and adjunct English faculty, incorporates rap and hip-hop culture into the literacy curriculum, which helps connect instruction to students' backgrounds and sparks their interest in writing.

 Engaging students with hip-hop texts in class help students - especially female students - reflect on their identities and hone their literacy skills (Kelly, 2016). Chiariello (2020), reported that culturally relevant instruction used in a literacy course and with hip-hop pedagogy correlates with expectations outlined in the Common Core State Standards. Morrell and Duncan-Andrade

(2002) promotes that hip-hop texts are literary texts and can scaffold literary terms and concepts and ultimately foster literary interpretations. Additionally, texts from hip-hop can analyze themes, motifs, plots, and character development. Furthermore, Morrell and Duncan-Andrade (2002) emphasize hip-hop as a bridge between the streets and the world of academics. The lyrics used in hip-hop text can also be valuable and used as springboards for critical discussions about contemporary issues facing urban youth.

Lipman (1995) identified characteristics of culturally responsive teaching, which includes hip-hop and literacy. Those characteristics are: 1) validating and affirming - acknowledges the strengths of students; diverse heritages; 2) comprehensive - using cultural resources to teach knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes; 3) multidimensional - applies multicultural theory to the classroom environment, teaching methods, and evaluations; 4) liberating - teachers liberate the students; 5) empowering - giving students opportunities to excel in the classroom and beyond. It translates into academic competence, personal confidence, courage, the will to act; and 6) transformative - educators and their students must often defy educational traditions and the status quo
.

Conclusion

The *Digest of Education* (2019) predicts that during the next decade, minority teachers will shrink by 5 percent, and enrollment of ethnic minority students in America's schools will grow by 41 percent. With student enrollment becoming more diverse, teachers must find ways to connect with students utilizing various modalities. As teachers in a new century school, educators must meet this challenge and discover ways to forge meaningful relationships with students who come from different worlds and cultures. Hip-hop pedagogy relates to the realities of a student's world and has become a best practice for teachers in urban educational environments. Ginwright (2004) explained that to be active with members of the hip-hop generation, the curriculum must relate to the realities of their world, their community. Finally, hip-hop music, literacy, and culture forge a common and critical discourse that has centered upon the lives of students yet transcended the racial divide and allowed educators nationally to tap into students' lives in ways that promote academic literacy and critical consciousness.

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