

Hip Hop Culture: “Keepin’ it real, keepin’ it right” Expanding cultural competency for urban teachers

During a break at the Education Conference of the 2010 Black Expo, Kamau Jywanza and I discussed the idea of cultural competency. As the conversation deepened about culture, we talked about student voice and how students might view this concept. Though we both grew up a part of the civil rights generation, we have awareness of youth culture, in particular that of the so-called “hip hop” generation. I told Kamau that this American youth culture now has a global reality. My travels to Europe, South America, Asia, and Australia brought me in contact with this global youth culture which of course essentially roots itself in the experiences of Black American youth.

This spurred Kamau’s insight: if our public schools must have culturally competent teachers, curriculum, and pedagogy, then along with African/African American, Latino, white urban working class, etc. cultures, global youth culture must become one of the cultures taken into account in the school and classroom. To gain respect and knowledge for American urban youth culture (aka global youth culture), this essay examines some history and then the insights of urban educators.

Keepin’ it real, keepin’ it right

In the early 1970s, a group of Black and Latino men and women gave birth to a culture of music, poetry, graphic art, dance, and fashion. They termed this culture “Hip Hop.”

In “Keepin’ It Real, Keepin’ It Right,” educator D. Miles Brady (2000) discusses being a black student in urban high schools in America. In this article, he quotes James Cone, from his groundbreaking work of 1969, “Black Theology 6-Black Power.” Mr. Cone offered the following “kernel of truth” which drove Miles Brady to compose the article referenced here: *This is a message to the oppressor, not in hope that he will listen, but with the expectation that my own existence will be clarified.* Cone’s insight made Brady asks: How will my own existence be clarified? How will the existences of young, black students be clarified and respected?

The pursuit of clarity by black people links directly to the enslavement of Africans in this country. With the culture of these enslaved Africans stripped from them, they lost their languages, religions and family kinship systems, being left no alternative but to assimilate the best they could in the context of the limitations placed upon them by their enslavers.

Yet, most black people in America, for the sake of their sanity and psychological health, at the same time had no choice but to reinvent themselves. With no tenable link to Africa and the desire to distance themselves from their enslavers, blacks have continued to create and recreate forms of cultural expression and thus personal identity.

According to Brady, out this same desire for re-creation came the clarifying potential of hip hop culture. He describes hip hop as “...an artistic rebellion against the humiliating

deadness of western culture." Hip hop culture reflects its own values. Respect, loyalty, and authenticity describe those values held in highest esteem.

Despite its own acknowledgment of a number of styles, hip hop and rap focus on "keeping it real" and remaining authentic to the culture. As a narrative of survival and independence, the popularity of authentic rap (mainly "underground" rap) reflects not giving away one's music to mainstream culture—and speaking out and acting out on those who do.

Within this equation, skin color usually, but not always serves as a determinant. Hip hop culture identifies as "busters," "crossovers," "studio gangsters" or "sell-outs who need to get the hell out," those black folks who misuse the genuine values of hip hop. What about unauthentic white folks? Hip hop culture typically considers them "Frankenstein creations" who outfit themselves in the expensive garments of young blackness.

Again, Brady points out, rap does not perpetuate stereotypes. Genuine rap does not focus on "the cheese" or being the top player or pimp. However, when white media deemed certain styles of rap as "gangsta rap," soon ignorant and "wack" MCs (rappers) began "wanna be" attempts to live up to this reputation. The original gave way to the copy. Commercialization turned hip hop into "hip pop."

Problems plaguing the Hip Hop Nation and Black urban students

In Brady's estimation, the culture of our urban public schools misunderstands real identities of young black men, preferring to devalue them, and find them somehow unmotivated and/or threatening. He says, unfortunately many times these young men will live up to the reputation. Or, some fall into categories of racelessness, attempting to cut out blank, generic identities. Others, who do not try to fit into the black urban mainstream, or who try to fit into the larger society their peers will dub them to be "defectors" and called "oreos" or "incognegroes." So, how can young black men "keep it real"? More importantly, how can our urban public schools help black urban youth find clarity and authenticity?

- Don't hassle urban youth in our public schools. Get out of the way! Let the (now global) culture of hip hop do what it does naturally: enable clarity. Brady notes that part of the solution of reconciling the struggle with the ability "to keep it real" lies within the struggle itself. The "quest to be recognized for who you are as not what the stereotype says, not what the image says, but for who you are, is a deep spiritual quest." This quest begins initially with the individual.

Hip hop advocate Brady believes today's black urban youth, as they search for clarity through cultural authenticity and personal self-actualization, answer certain questions raised by hip hop culture:

- What is the black identity to which one is struggling to adhere?
- What is real?
- What is not real?
- If the quest is about being recognized for who you are then who are you?
- What is being black?

The promise of hip-hop culture

Notes from *Black In School: Afrocentric reform, urban youth, and the promise of hip-hop culture* by Prof. Shawn Ginwright of the Cesar Chavez Institute reflect the same value system described by Brady. Ginwright gives urban teachers the following insights into the American side of global youth culture:

- The cultural disconnect between current urban school staff and many urban students presents the single most important challenge in reaching these youth. Why? Students simply do not find motivation, interest, or inspiration by school reform efforts that do not represent their urban identities.

“While progressive hip-hop culture functions as the voice of resistance for America's black youth, it also provides a blueprint for the possibilities of positive social change for the entire society—helping America live up to its promise of liberty and justice for all. Rather than focusing on how to change black youth and their culture, these strategies use the innovative and creative energy of black youth as a platform to build a strong sociopolitical awareness.” ~ Dr. Shawn Ginwright, *Black in School*

- Urban school staff ignore the multiple and often complex identities of urban youth and undermine the profound influence that urban poverty has on efforts to improve urban schools.
- A common theme between all these expressions of black identity defines blackness as a form of resistance. Many, if not most, black youth construct their identity in resistance to public school education.

“When we ask, what is the state of Hip hop?, the quick answer is that Hip hop (the community) must mature to a level of self-government where it creates, regulates, and profits from its own elements, resources, and intellectual properties. The state of Hip hop is that Hip hop is being negatively exploited by the recording industries of America who manipulate its public image to sell the fantasy of pimpin', thuggin', hoein', flashin', flossin', and ballin' to predominantly young White Rap fans that are impressed by such behaviors. On the one hand it is Hip hop's rebellious image that attracts young people to it. However, on the other hand, the real lives of those that live around pimps, thugs, whores, drug dealers, etc., are far from being just fantasies of defiance that you can turn off and on when you want to feel sexy or macho! The real lives of those that are affected by injustice, lawlessness, and corruption created (and continue to create) Hip hop as a way out of oppression.” ~KRS-ONE, *Ruminations*, 2003

- Today, urban school reform efforts that focus entirely on race and ethnicity remain woefully insufficient.

We can describe hip hop culture as an emerging worldview among adults and youth born after 1965

This worldview comprises shared beliefs, practices, and language all tied together by a common appreciation for the urban aesthetic. Hip-hop culture shares at least two important characteristics.

1. **The urban youth aesthetic.** Perhaps the most easily recognizable aspect of hip-hop, this characteristic expresses itself through music, clothing, hair styles, language, and art. More than simply rap music and graffiti art, the urban youth aesthetic refers to

visual and artistic expression of hip hop culture. Rap music—expressive and innovative syncopated rhythms, laced with poetry, and story telling—grew into one of the first expressions of hip-hop culture during the early 1970s. The urban youth aesthetic has now a multibillion-dollar industry complete with clothing, art, language, and of course music.

2. The urban youth experience. Economic isolation, poverty, and a struggle to "make it out" of the trappings of urban ghettos often shapes this experience. Hip hop culture oftentimes validates, legitimizes, and celebrates experiences of violence, pain, fear, love, and hope that for urban youth are overlooked in mainstream America. *To seriously discuss black youth identity, educators, policy makers, and researchers must consider the inseparable relationship between black youth identity and hip hop culture. Failing to do so, Ginwright cautions, represents a gross oversight.*

Defining culture too narrowly: Global youth culture moves beyond race

Thus, Ginwright advises urban educators to realize hip hop generation youth around the world construct complex identities--identities that move beyond color and include issues of social class, gender, and sexuality. Global youth in low-income urban communities define themselves not only by race and ethnic culture, but also by the neighborhoods in which they live, the schools they attend, gang affiliations, hair styles, clothing, and certainly hip-hop culture.

“The Hip Hop Generation will advance the struggle for national civil rights to that of one for global human rights.”
~Black & Latino Policy Institute, Indianapolis

Ginwright suggests 2 positions urban teachers must take to engage urban students:

- **Validate hip hop culture**

Validating hip hop culture, also affirms the struggle of urban students for racial and economic justice. This affirmation provides a key starting point for building and strengthening other aspects of black youth identity and connecting urban schooling to education for liberation and cultural empowerment.

Some urban educators and school administrative staff criticize students who see being black as speaking slang, braided hair, sagging pants and skewed hats. They describe blackness as knowing black history and appreciating African values, not dressing like a gangster. *Right or wrong, this disconnects hip hop youth from schools and their staff.*

“Urban students are asked to trade their home and community cultures for the ‘higher culture’ of school and access to college. This reduces life choices to a false binary: stay ‘behind’ as a failure, or ‘get out’ as a success. Faced with the prospect of leaving their communities, many students quit. Although in conflict with the expectations, they choose to keep an urban and cultural identity--even if the cost is school failure. To work, urban schools must begin to develop partnerships with communities, providing students opportunities for academic success while maintaining their identities as urban youth.”

~ paraphrased from Dr. Jeffery Duncan-Andrade

Therefore, a primary challenge to urban school educators centers on how to tap into the oppositional culture of hip hop so that it might revive new and more inclusive forms of schooling and democratic possibilities. Using a critical pedagogy and enabling authentic student voice in classroom and school decision-making is what’s needed.

- **Think of Urban Youth Culture as an Asset, Not a Liability**

Expanding and strengthening urban school reform (in particular multi-cultural approaches manifested in cultural competency/Black history-based approaches) require more than simple step-by-step practices and curriculum strategies. More important, it requires a bold and courageous paradigm shift on the part of urban educators to conceptualize youth culture as a culture—a *global*-level asset rather than a liability in educational reform efforts.

- This Black middle-class initiated multicultural effort to instill African and African American history into urban school curriculum will fail if it does not go further and develop students' capacity to confront and transform the serious day-to-day social and economic challenges urban students face.

Bridges (2011) reveals 3 hip hop principles urban educators can endorse and use to engage students: a) Call to Service, b) Commitment to Self-Awareness, and c) Resistance to Social Injustice. Each can profoundly shape teaching and learning environments supportive for Black male teachers and their urban students.

- **Conclusion** While multi-cultural/cultural competency/Black history curriculum focus on educational strategies building ethnic identity and providing culturally consistent learning opportunities, this approach must also support and validate global youth culture. In doing so, schools must help urban families and communities solve the problems students face daily. These issues include hunger, unemployment, housing, health, family and community violence, apathy and nihilism, social and criminal justice issues, alcohol and drugs, and unresponsive public schools. This problem solving must begin with developing leadership skills and fostering critical thinking, organizing and actions challenging and *changing* social and economic patterns that support deeply rooted racist, sexist, and classist practices in schools and society. Black cultural-oriented education reform efforts hold great promise for transforming youth, their schools, and their communities. Such changes will happen once these efforts articulate a clear socio-political vision by making direct connections with racial, economic justice, and cultural empowerment issues that describe more of the immediate concerns of urban students.

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References

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This position paper is a compilation of ideas, concepts, and quotes from “Keepin’ It Real, Keepin’ It Right: Identity Culture, Hip-hop, and Young, Black Men in America’s Schools” by D. Miles Brady *Democracy In Education*. 14, 2. Athens, OH: The Institute for Democracy in Education and *Black in school: Afrocentric reform, urban youth, and the promise of hip-hop culture*. New York City: Teachers College Columbia University, New York City, 2004. ISBN 0-8077-4431-X. Dr. Shawn Ginwright, Department of Anthropology and Sociology, Ethnic Studies Program, Santa Clara University, CA.