Hip-hop defines Black urban youth

The greatest thing about my situation is that I am a product of the early "old school" hip-hop generation. Born in the early 70's, I had the opportunity to experience and live through the birth of an entire culture. This culture, during the 70's, 80's and early 90's, as a whole, had an understanding about the civil rights movement, racial identity and political and social injustice. If one doesn't believe me, look at the artists that influence both my way of thinking and living. Artists such as KRS 1, Public Enemy, X-Clan and yes even 2Pac and NWA, understood that this new hip hop generation was hungry for someone or anyone to speak out against the struggles, injustices and racisms that were going on in the community and in our schools. Today's hip-hop culture represented by 50 Cent, The Game and T.I. have a different approach. As their predecessors, these artists also speak to black youth; however, their lyrics focus on quick money, getting rich and living above the rules.

In "Locating the Dropout Crisis," Johns Hopkins researchers flagged 2,000 high schools as "dropout factories." Between 1990 and 2002, other than Stockton, CA, IPS was the only district where students had, and continue to have, no choice but to go to a dropout factory.

In his book, *Black in school*, Shawn Ginwright discusses the inability of educators to connect with, inspire, and move black urban working class students. He argues that the cultural disconnect between civil rights generation and hip-hop generations is an obstacle to reaching urban black youth who are simply not motivated, interested, or inspired by reform efforts in which their urban identities are not represented. While multicultural reform tries to balance culturally biased and racist curricula by infusing West African principles, they are rarely connected to black urban experiences—marginalizing hip-hop and replacing one form of cultural mismatch with another. Obviously, with low graduation rates, locally and nationally, success with multicultural reforms seems limited.

In the 1970s and 80s, multicultural and Afrocentric education reforms attempted to expose the Eurocentric bias found in urban schools and connect African values and classroom practices. These reforms aimed to reclaim, reconstruct, and reposition black youth identity.

Today, black youth identity is often defined by hip-hop. It rises out of a context of struggle and is expressed in unique cultural forms of an urban esthetic of music, art, and dress that redefines, reasserts, and constantly reestablishes what it means to be urban and black.

Black youth of the post-civil rights era are politically savvy. They see the corruption and shallowness of society. This perspective is key to understanding the experiences, motivation, and aspirations of youth. Hip-hop is more than a voice, but a form of political resistance. Hip-hop calls attention to their struggles and validates their everyday experiences, providing a vision of social justice.

Indeed, Afrocentrism exposed racism. Yet, alone, it has little meaning to youth at the bottom of the economic ladder. Simply celebrating students' culture is not enough while failing to challenge or even acknowledge the effects of poverty on school success.

Afrocentric strategies came to influence academic outcomes through affecting racial identity. Yet, the hip-hop generation's identity is more than race. In a global village, it now

includes class, religion, language, neighborhood, multiracial background, politics, gang affiliation, diet, music, or dress.

Ginwright suggests *multicultural educators validate and affirm black youth identity.* Some educators are critical of students who see being black as speaking slang, braided hair, sagging pants and skewed hats. They say that blackness is knowing black history and appreciating African values, not dressing like a gangster. Right or wrong, this disconnects hip-hop from older generations.

Hip-hop culture emerged from tremendous economic, social and cultural pressures on black urban youth. By validating hip-hop culture, their struggle for racial and economic justice is also affirmed. The civil rights generation and the new black middle-class must tap into the oppositional culture of hip-hop so that it might revive new and more inclusive forms of schooling and democratic possibilities.

Ginwright also suggests *black educators see hip-hop culture as an asset, not a* liability. He does not deny the negative influences of hip-hop culture and stresses it must self-critical; yet, he wants educators to not deny its promise. Armed with an understanding of inequality and a passion for social justice, black youth around the country want a say in decisions that impact their lives. While multiculturalism develops identity of black students, it must help create a democratic climate that provides students this voice. In democratic schools, they can demand their schools be equal to the best, and receive help in solving the problems of poverty they face everyday in schools and communities. This holds great promise for effective educational reform strategies.

Multicultural reform emphasizing racial and economic justice enables black youth to develop a political awareness that can translate to both citizenship and educational performance. This provides opportunity for civil rights and hop-hip generations to work together transforming schools and communities.

Educators transform schools and community through youth engagement by teaching for social justice. The urban experience is shaped by economic isolation, poverty, and struggle. Hip-hop culture validates, legitimizes, and celebrates experiences of violence, pain, fear, love, and hope for youth who are overlooked in mainstream America. To seriously discuss school reform, we must consider the relationship between black youth identity and hip-hop culture. Failing to do so, Ginwright says, is a gross oversight.

Jose M. Evans

Jose Evans is the former director of the Indiana State Commission of the Social Status of Black Males. He is currently co-chairperson of the Black and Latino Policy Institute.