What Is Hip-Hop-Based Education Doing in *Nice* Fields Such as Early Childhood and Elementary Education?

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Abstract

Hip-Hop-Based Education (HHBE) has resulted in many positive educational outcomes, ranging from teaching academic skills to teaching critical reflection at secondary levels. Given what HHBE initiatives have accomplished, it is troubling that there is an absence of attention to these methods in education programs for elementary and early childhood educators. For that reason, I intend to use theories of sociocultural learning to examine how young urban children's Hip Hop communities of practice influence their early learning and identities. Through personal narratives, this work theorizes young urban children's Hip Hop identities by utilizing children's situated learning activities. The goal of the work is to begin a dialogue for the application of HHBE in early childhood and elementary education pre-service teacher programs.

Keywords

Hip Hop, early childhood, elementary education, community of practice, identities

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Introduction

The title of this article takes inspiration from Gloria Ladson-Billings's (1998) provocative and seminal essay, "Just What Is Critical Race Theory and What's It Doing in a *Nice* Field Like Education?" In that essay, Ladson-Billings effectively argued that the framework of critical race theory (CRT) must be applied to the field of education in the United States. She argued that one primary function of schooling is to foster citizenship, and CRT is a useful framework to interrogate how citizenship is tied and tethered to the social construct of race. The early architects of CRT, Derrick Bell, Richard Delgado, and Alan Freeman (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001), created this theory out of a deep dissatisfaction with the slow pace of racial reform in the United States, and the realization that traditional approaches—protests, marches, and calls to the moral sensibilities of citizens—only slightly moved the pendulum of justice, if at all (Ladson-Billings, 1998).

At the time of its invention, the concepts of CRT in the field of education were unconventional. However, all indicators of racial progress within education, after the landmark case of *Brown v. Board of Education*, told the story of Black and Brown students enduring "curriculum as a culturally specific artifact designed to maintain a White supremacist master script" (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 11), instruction and assessment that viewed Black and Brown students as defiant, and school funding formulas that perpetuated school inequities from the onset (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Through her treatise, Ladson-Billings challenged educational researchers, who focused on the lives of Black and Brown children, to make a collective shift to a theoretical framework equipped to interrogate the nuances of the educational reform movements. In so doing, she underscored the fact that, while many liberals viewed racial progress as painstakingly slow, yet achievable, CRT scholars argued that even "civil rights laws continue to serve the interest of Whites" (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 9).

The work of Ladson-Billings in this area, in addition to other scholars (Bell, 1980a, 1980b; DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Dixson, & Rousseau, 2006; Jennings & Lynn, 2005; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Stovall, 2006a; Tate, 1997) of merging CRT and the field of education, transformed educational research concerning race, inequalities, and citizenship. Using CRT effectively exposed the injustices of the "nice" field of education toward students of color. That unconventional approach is also relevant to the focus of this article, as the emerging field of Hip-Hop-based education (HHBE) has yet to consider seriously the position of Hip Hop in the "nice" fields of early childhood and elementary education.

Marc Lamont Hill (2009) defines HHBE as an umbrella phrase to "collectively comprise" (p. 3) educational research using the elements of Hip Hop culture (i.e., rap, turntablism, break dancing, graffiti, knowledge of self, fashion, language), which inform pedagogy in formal and non-formal school spaces. Unfortunately, many teachers of young children are apprehensive of or resistant to using HHBE as a pedagogical framework because commercial rap music is viewed as too mature or sexually explicit for young children. I do not disagree with that assertion, but that view reduces Hip Hop solely to commercial rap music, which therein marginalizes children's experiences with Hip Hop's cultural practices and denies upper elementary-aged students the opportunity to engage in critical dialogue (e.g., critical media literacy) regarding all rap music, be it commercial or not. In addition, the culture of Hip Hop is present in the lives of young children, beyond just the element of rap, which is why HHBE is important to the field.

While the effectiveness and promise of HHBE are demonstrated in separate reviews by Petchauer (2009) and Alim (2009a), according to Irby and Hall (2011), there is a "glaring incongruence with the literature" concerning the "prevalence, effectiveness, and appropriateness of HHBE theory and practice in primary grades" (p. 237). Even HHBE educational practitioners and researchers have failed to interrogate the ways in which HHBE can be integrated into elementary classrooms. Historically, HHBE is reserved for middle and high school-aged students. Given the positive educational outcomes of HHBE, its absence in education programs targeted at preparing teachers to work with elementary and early childhood-aged students is thoroughly troubling.

Therefore, just as CRT was considered too radical to be married to education, and yet was necessary to understand the lives of students of color and how their educational experiences were rooted in and informed by racism, discrimination, and disfranchisement, a similar point holds true for HHBE in early childhood and elementary education. Pressing further, HHBE for early learners places emphasis not just on public education, which is one of the bedrocks of democracy in the United States, but on how the youngest learners are influenced by Hip Hop through their caregivers and communities' music, language, and cultural pastimes. As a Hip Hop educator and researcher focused on elementary education, I am confident that HHBE is ready to engage our youngest learners, yet this shift toward the primary grades has been slow and gradual. Too often, the inclusion of Hip Hop in early childhood or elementary classrooms is simply to help young children memorize math equations, rules of punctuation, or historical facts, and is rarely explicitly tied to their culture. Furthermore, many teachers' reservations regarding HHBE are seemingly knotted to their perceptions of Hip Hop as low culture

composed of deviant, nihilistic attributes that they believe are harmful to young learners. In order for a critical mass of educators to use Hip Hop as a teaching framework interwoven to students' culture, that negativity toward Hip Hop music culture must essentially be disrupted through early childhood and elementary education pre-service teacher programs. By changing the methods used in these early education classrooms, teachers can begin to understand that Hip Hop is hardwired not only to their children's culture but also to their learning potential and identities. Equally important is that children see their culture affirmed and recognized.

To complete this shift in education, Irby and Hall (2011) suggest that Hip Hop scholarship should also focus on educators who are outsiders to Hip Hop and on their willingness to use Hip Hop in the classroom. A great deal of Hip Hop education scholarship contends that educators without a personal connection to Hip Hop are more likely to position it in simplistic terms and not explore with any depth or complexity the reasons why Hip Hop is oversaturated with rap music that degrades women and bolsters sexually explicit and violent lyrics. However, current research is starting to show that educators who are outsiders to Hip Hop see the educational value of Hip Hop culture, but lack the knowledgebase concerning the culture to feel comfortable enough to include Hip Hop in their teaching practices, and question the corporate takeover of the sounds and images of rap music. For example, after teaching four education workshops from 2006 to 2009 focused on preparing educators to effectively teach HHBE, Irby and Hall (2011) found that some of the teachers attending the workshops were educators who were outsiders to the culture, but were using Hip Hop in their classrooms prior to the workshop, and desired more knowledge about its historical and social development. The study concluded that although many educators recognize Hip Hop as a legitimate teaching framework, they have questions regarding how to teach HHBE effectively within the constraints of their respective schools. Findings such as these led Irby, Hall, and Hill (2013) to conclude the following:

> We are experiencing a generational shift in the U.S. teaching force. Because of this shift, along with the increased presence of hip-hop culture within American culture, many educators no longer view hip-hop culture with the same air of skepticism common in the early stages of HHBE. Our findings indicate that many educators recognize the intellectual merits of hip-hop culture. (p. 15)

That assertion is clearly evident in the overwhelming success of the social media movement #HipHopEd, which is expanding teachers' knowledge of the culture of Hip Hop and its pedagogical possibilities. Every Tuesday night

from 9:00 p.m. to 10:00 p.m. Eastern Standard Time, educators, researchers, parents, and community members from around the globe take to Twitter to discuss a variety of topics solely focused on HHBE. These chats connect people from all walks of life to a community of individuals concerned about the effectiveness of HHBE, and the inclusion of Hip Hop culture and student identities within the curriculum.[1] My goal is to ensure that, as HHBE becomes more popular, the youngest learners are included in the movement.

In line with the focus of this special issue, this article, written from a sociocultural learning perspective, explores how the social interactions, language styles, cultural artifacts, and cultural hybridity of Hip Hop form Hip Hop communities of practice (Wilson, 2007) for young urban children, which has pedagogical implications. Drawing heavily on the work of Jean Lave and Étienne Wenger (1991), I intend to examine how children's Hip Hop communities of practice influence their early learning and identities by way of theories of sociocultural learning: intent participation (Rogoff, Paradise, Arauz, Correa-Chavez, & Angelillo, 2003) and guided participation (Rogoff, 1994). Through personal narratives, I also theorize young urban children's Hip Hop identities, a concept severely under-researched, by utilizing children's situated learning activities. The goal of this article is to begin a critical, yet fruitful, dialogue for the application of HHBE in early childhood and elementary education pre-service teacher programs to ultimately affect students' learning in the future.

Hip Hop Community of Practice

The first wave of the Hip Hop generation (i.e., folks born between 1965 and 1984), and those after, who are now parents, caregivers, coaches, dance instructors, rappers, DJs, artists, aunts, uncles, and community mentors (this list is by no means exhaustive), are shaping children's culture and cognitive abilities in a way that is deeply influenced by their own Hip Hop identities. These individuals' "habits of body and habits of mind" (Petchauer, 2012, p. 2) are informed by Hip Hop. From this position, cultural influencers' social interactions with children are situated within the language styles, kinship norms, and artifacts of Hip Hop for collective learning (Wilson, 2007).

From a sociocultural stance, Lave and Wenger (1991) refer to learning by way of social interactions as "communities of practice." In their book, *Situated Learning*, Lave and Wenger (1991) marshal in the notion that learning is essentially a social process, whereby individuals participate in situated activities with "communities of practitioners working toward full participation in the sociocultural practices of the community" (p. 29). Communities of practice are knowledge-based social structures composed of individuals with

a shared interest, concern, or passion for a topic (Lave & Wenger). Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002) state that individuals sharing knowledge through situated learning activities—such as apprenticeship, coaching, and storytelling—foster ongoing participation, which moves members into the role of doers, and "doing" is an essential component of communities of practice. Wenger (1998) states that there are three necessary characteristics to being a community of practice: (a) domain, (b) community, (c) and practice.

1. Domain is the identity of the group, the collective expertise that separates members from non-members. A well-defined domain sets the learning outcomes for the group.
2. Community refers to individuals who engage in communal activities, discussions, and sharing of knowledge for the betterment of all members. These communal learning experiences foster a sense of belonging and commitment to the group.
3. Practice has everything to do with the act of "doing." Creating a community of practitioners who participate in routines, gestures, norms, ways of performing, and actions of the established community.

These components help to form a community of practice with established standards, performance goals, and communication methods. Such situated learning activities—what Lave and Wenger (1991) call "legitimate peripheral participation"—provide opportunities for newcomers who desire mastery and full participation within the community, and the trajectory to do so, as they learn from veterans of the community by way of keen listening and observing skills, and discussion.

Expanding on Lave and Wenger's (1991) work in response to the cultural practices and communal learning within Hip Hop, Joycelyn Wilson (2007) calls for a "Hip Hop community of practice." She defines this term as follows:

> Focusing inquiry and situating it based on what hip-hop participants "do"— that is, how they practice hip-hop in their day-to-day lives, and how what they do creates meaning and identity. How youth and youth influencers utilize the hip hop community of practice to define, curate, and use artifacts, language styles, kinship norms, schooling methods, epistemologies of authenticity, and aesthetic practices to remix generational narratives about ideology, identity, race, class, and gender. (Wilson, 2007, p. 68)

Wilson understands Hip Hop to be a tool for reflecting on the past to make connections with the present, centered on African traditions. She views Hip Hop culture, as "a network of generations tied together by ethnic origin,

spiritual orientations, geographic tendencies, kinship norms, and several other community oriented practices including artistic expressions, communal traditions, philosophies, social values, and imposed social orders" (Wilson, 2007, p. 6). Thus, Hip Hop at its core is a space of communal learning, which influences children's social, emotional, educational, physical, and creative skills from birth. Children raised in a Hip Hop community of practice are developing cognitive skills by participating, observing, and being in physical and digital proximity to Hip Hop cultural practitioners and influencers.

For this reason, in the last 10 years, there has been a proliferation of children's television programming, books, and music focused on Hip Hop's cultural practices of improvisation, call and response, communal learning, rich storytelling, and history (e.g., *Hip and Hop, Don't Stop* [Czekaj, 2010]; *Bun B's Rapper Coloring and Activity Book* [Serrano, 2013]; *When the Beat Was Born: DJ Kool Herc nd the Creation of Hip Hop* [Hill, 2003]; and *Hip Hop Speaks to Children: A Celebration of Poetry With a Beat* [Giovanni, 2008]). Moreover, there are many young reader books detailing the lives of Hip Hop artists and pioneers. For example, in 2006, Rosen Publishing established a series titled "The Library of Hip-Hop Biographies." To date, Rosen has released biographies on LL Cool J, Jay Z, Kanye West, The Beastie Boys, Queen Latifah, Sean Combs, Russell Simmons, and Salt-N-Pepa. In addition, children's television shows such as *Hip Hop Harry, Yo Gabba, Choo Soul*, and Andre 3000's Atlanta-based cartoon show *Class of 3000* are an eclectic tapestry of funk, jazz, and Hip Hop. All of these shows use the culture and sound of Hip Hop to teach young children social, educational, physical, and creative skills. In addition, a number of Hip Hop artists have guest starred on *Sesame Street*: Common, Ice-T, The Fugees, Queen Latifah, LL Cool J, and MC Lyte. Last, there is a genre of Hip Hop music called *Kid Hop*, which focuses on kid friendly lyrics. Artist Secret Agent 23 Skidoo refers to himself as the king of Kid Hop. In 2011, comedian Wayne Brady released a kid friendly Hip Hop album, *Radio Wayne*. Finally, the animated rap group Krazy Kuzins is comprised of four White school-aged children who rap. Krazy Kuzins releases music under Music World Entertainment, a company owned and operated by Mathew Knowles, Beyoncé Knowles's father.[2]

The aforementioned texts, music, and television programming represent cultural artifacts, which are also part of young learners' Hip Hop communities of practice. According to Wenger (1998), artifacts are fundamental to a community of practice because artifacts provide meaningful learning experiences. Hip Hop's cultural artifacts and physical activities provide tactile–kinesthetic learning experiences for young urban children. Furthermore, artifacts help construct a community's social history. For example, Rosen's Hip Hop biographies teach youth Hip Hop's historical narratives, just like a

book about the life of George Washington or Johnny Appleseed. Cultural artifacts also provide historical representation, context, and the reasoning behind traditions and norms. Above all, these cultural artifacts help facilitate young children's cognitive development, which is why it is vital that early childhood and elementary education programs investigate the situated learning communities of children who engage in meaningful learning through a Hip Hop community of practice lens.

Examining the situated learning contexts of young urban learners who engage with Hip Hop communities of practice is essential to understanding urban youths' lifelong developmental potential established from the onset of life. Sadly, the early learning practices of Hip Hop have yet to penetrate the field of early childhood and elementary education pre-service teacher programs for application toward understanding and integrating urban youth's situated learning practices. This roadblock is problematic because, according to a report by Yoshikawa et al. (2013), the early years of a child's learning is tacitly sensitive to external influences. The report adds that young learners' brain architecture is shaped by early experiences within their home, care setting, and communities. These settings lay the foundation for early language, literacy, and math skills, as well as empathy and self-regulation.

The need to examine young urban children's learning communities is imperative. Researchers have argued that to close the achievement and opportunity gap, quality early learning is vital (Isaacs, 2012). However, I contend that quality early learning should be rooted in children's communities of practice to draw on the knowledge they already possess, as they enter early learner centers and elementary classrooms. My recommendation is in light of the fact that according to the Children's Defense Fund (2002), only 4% of eligible infants and toddlers are able to attend Early Head Start programs due to limited funding.

Given the situation outlined above, it is vital that the "nice" fields of early childhood and elementary education are revamped to include HHBE to affirm the learning preferences of young learners, but also to address the inequalities in early learning and school readiness by utilizing the skill sets children bring to early learning spaces to further their development. Too often, children's "funds of knowledge" (Moll & Gonzalez, 1994) are silenced in the classroom even at an early age. One way to remedy this practice is to use students' situated ways of learning in their Hip Hop communities of practice as a springboard for their learning in formal educational spaces. Another aspect, but oftentimes overlooked, is research that conceptualizes how social and cultural practices shift and shape identities. According to Wenger (1998), membership in a community of practice shifts a person's identity as he or she engages with people, activities, and cultural artifacts of that particular

community. For children where a Hip Hop community of practice is present, particularly for urban children, their identity is shaped not only by Hip Hop's cultural practices but also by the cultural hybridity of urban America and Hip Hop. This stimulus is why HHBE for young children should be grounded in pedagogical frameworks that address cultural hybridity from a strength- and asset-based perspective. To address this dilemma, I argue that teacher-educator programs must explicitly position HHBE under the framework of culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP; Paris, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2014) because young urban children's Hip Hop community of practice is entwined with their identities rooted in cultural plurality.

StyleShiftin': The Cultural Hybridity and Identity of Hip Hop's Youngest

The crux of CSP builds on the work of culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP; Ladson-Billings, 1995) and culturally responsive pedagogy (Cazden & Leggett, 1976; Gay, 2000). These strength- and asset-based pedagogies contend that all children have linguistic, literate, and cultural practices that derive from their homes and communities to inform their identities. The aforementioned conceptual teaching frameworks stand on three basic assumptions: (a) All students, no matter their age, come to school with heritage, linguistic, and community knowledge; (b) throughout history and to the present day, students of color have been pushed to the margins of education and viewed as deficient because their culture does not reflect the dominant European American culture; and (c) placing students' culture at the forefront of the curriculum and pedagogy can help students achieve academically and produce students able to critique inequality and social order (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

By the mid-1990s, the framework of CRP penetrated educational discourse as a teaching method for "students of color marginalized by systemic inequalities based on race, ethnicity, and language" (Paris, 2012, p. 94). CRP was pivotal in challenging the deficit approach because the premise of the work argues that a child's academic success depends deeply on the ways in which he or she locates, accesses, and situates his or her culture within the school's curriculum and pedagogy (Bernstein, 2000). Again, Ladson-Billings's seminal work was particularly interested in the culture of African American students (1994/2009), and established not only that African American students enter schools with culture but also that there is pedagogical value in the textual, social, cultural, and personal lives of these students.

Through the work of Ladson-Billings and others, a rich and robust field of scholarship devoted to CRP has reproduced to include Latinas/Latinos, Indigenous Americans, Asian Americans, and Pacific Islander Americans

(Ball, 1995; Garcia, 1993; C. D. Lee, 1995; McCarty, Romero, & Zepeda, 2006; Moll & Gonzalez, 1994; Valdes, 1996). Important to this work is one of the latest iterations of CRP: situating Hip Hop culture, music, and text in classrooms to teach academic skills (Alexander-Smith, 2004; Alim, 2007; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2005; Emdin, 2010), critical reflection (Hill, 2006, 2009; Love, 2013, 2014; Stovall, 2006b; Williams, 2009), and citizenship (Pardue, 2004, 2007). The lynchpin for utilizing Hip Hop culture as a pedagogical approach is to recognize and affirm students' culture with an understanding that students create and engage in cultural practices in out-of-school contexts that shape their ways of "behaving, interacting, valuing, thinking, believing, speaking, and often reading and writing, that are accepted as instantiations of particular identities" (Gee, 1996, p. 3).

Through the lens of social linguistics (i.e., Discourse), Gee (1996) argues, "what we say, think, feel, and do is always indebted to the social groups to which we have been apprenticed" (p. vii). Gee's claim is also useful within the theory of community of practice because it highlights how identities are constructed as individuals engage in social interactions. In a like manner, urban children's social interactions, especially within Hip Hop communities of practice, center on the rich and innovative culture practices of communities of color (i.e., Indigenous American, African American, Latina/o, Asian American, and Pacific Islander). Thus, a fundamental facet of urban life is cultural hybridity. This fact is one of the reasons behind the shift in the field of asset-based pedagogies to CSP. Paris (2012) defines the term as an alternative to CRP because it "seeks to perpetuate and foster—to sustain—linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling" (p. 93). In 2014, Ladson-Billings acknowledged that CRP needed to be "remixed" by exploring the possibilities of CSP.

CSP is an important framework for the field of HHBE because it builds on the cultural diversity, multiple identities, and richness of Hip Hop culture to conceptualize what HHBE can be when derived from an examination of a child's Hip Hop communities of practice. Furthermore, it moves Hip Hop culture and HHBE away from the notion that they are solely reserved for African American children. Drawing on the work of Milner and Lomotey (2013), I define urban as dense inner-city communities with economic, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity that function as breeding grounds for hybridity of ethnic and cultural identities. My definition of urban is the foundation of my work for defining urban youth who identify with Hip Hop within their group and individual identity formations. Pulling from the work of Bakhtin's concept of "ideological self," "[H]uman consciousness does not come into contact with existence directly, but through the medium of the surrounding ideological world" (Bakhtin & Medvedev, 1928/1978, p. 14). Thus,

all learning is a social act, oftentimes rooted in the hybridity of cultural identities. This focus on the surrounding social world and the hybridity of identity illustrates how children who are not African American can identify with Hip Hop music and culture. This phenomenon is evident in the array of children's books, television shows, and music geared toward children of all ethnicities. Children's language, literacy practices, ways of learning, and ideological views are a process of constructing and deciphering their own discourses by struggling with, challenging, and negotiating multiple ideological positions and discourses. For urban children, no matter their race or ethnicity, Hip Hop culture is one of the many social and cultural sites in the complex and fluid web of identity formations for children beginning in early childhood. However, there is a dearth of literature focused on the identities of young children, particularly children's Hip Hop identities.

Historically, research focused on urban youth identities and Hip Hop was predominately centered on African American, Caribbean, and Latino/a young adults. However, the current contours of the landscape of Hip Hop music and culture are vast and more inclusive, and the research focused on Hip Hop and youth has followed suit. Boyd (2003) points out that

> it is precisely this series of moves from the local, to the regional, to the national, and even to the global that demonstrate this expression of hip-hop's cultural identity in the broadest sense, confounding any attempts to read blackness as monolithic. (p. 19)

Motley and Henderson (2008) add that "[w]hile the core essence and elements of hip-hop are shared by all members of the hip hop culture, the aesthetic is adapted to suit multiple national cultures, localized conditions and grievances" (p. 248). Thus, Hip Hop culture is rooted in and is fundamentally tied to the daily experiences of individuals and groups who engage in sharing, building, preserving, and creating Hip Hop's identity in the lives of all who participate or observe, regardless of race, ethnicity, or gender.

Utilizing Wilson's (2007) concept of Hip Hop community of practice, Gee's models of discourse, and Bakhtin's theory of ideological self, Hip Hop creates ways of doing Hip Hop that beget and curate ideologies, identities, language styles, and kinship norms that inform learning from the onset of life. Bakhtin's (1981) theory of ideological self rests on the notion that the more diverse one's environment, the more opportunity for personal growth and the "process of selectivity assimilating the words of others" (p. 341).

Under those circumstances, children's Hip Hop communities of practice, and thus one of their many identities, are closely framed by cultural hybridity. To date, scholars have investigated the identity formations of young adults

who engage with rap music and videos as text in their own social and cultural practices (Clay, 2003; Dimitriadis, 2001; Forman, 2001; Hill, 2009; Ibrahim, 1999; Sealey-Ruiz & Greene, 2011) but have yet to examine Hip Hop identities of young children. This lack of research compounds the historical practice of thinking that HHBE is just for middle and high school students. The absence of literature begets the following questions:

1. What does Hip Hop identity look like in the lives of young urban children?
2. What does it look like when children are active in a Hip Hop community of practice?

To answer these questions, I return to the framework of CRT. A fundamental principle of CRT is storytelling. Thus, I will draw from my work experiences as a night director of an early learning center, as an elementary school teacher, and now a researcher focused on how students' cultures inform their learning. Through storytelling, "a method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told" (Solórzano & Yosso. 2002, p. 26), I can bring to bear the learning experiences of young urban children who have been left out of most child development studies.

Historically, developmental systems taught to early childhood and elementary education pre-service teachers ignore culture and focus heavily on biology or stages of development that oversimplify pedagogical practices (Bruner, 1996; Cole, 1996; Miller, 1999). Specifically, many early childhood teacher programs stress sociocultural approaches to learning and development to examine the role that culture plays in human growth and language but fail to examine how "each community's valued skills constitute the local goals of development" (Rogoff, Mosier, Mistry, & Göncü, 1993, p. 233). By using the method of storytelling, I proffer theories of sociocultural learning to young urban children's Hip Hop communities of practice.

Da Art of Storytellin'

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

I completed my master's in elementary education at the University of Pittsburgh. My thesis focused on the absence of Hip Hop artifacts (e.g., rap lyrics as text, graffiti, and urban fashion) in the formal school setting for urban children. Once I finished my master's, I took my first job as a night director of an early learning center. The center was located in the inner city of Pittsburgh surrounded by local businesses: hair and nail shops, check cashing

stores, clothing boutiques, and corner stores where you could buy just one cigarette or a pack. What made the center unique and in high demand was the fact that it did not close until midnight. Monday through Friday, the center opened at 6:00 a.m. As the night director, I worked from 4:00 p.m. until 12:00 a.m. Due to the afterschool program, the center enrolled children from 6 weeks old through sixth grade. Due to my hours, I was able to engage with the majority of children at the center as I was there before parents with typical working hours picked up their babies at 5:30 p.m., and I was still there when parents who worked late arrived to take their children home for the night. However, what I valued the most while working at the center were my inter-actions with co-workers and parents. As a 22-year-old, I was close not only with my colleagues but also with many of the parents. We connected espe-cially through music, mostly Hip Hop and Rhythm and Blues (R&B).

Most of the younger caregivers worked with the students aged 8 to 12, and our older staff traditionally worked with the babies. In the upper age rooms, the radio was always tuned to Pittsburgh's local Hip Hop or R&B stations. New music was typically released on Tuesdays, so all conversations on Mondays focused on the anticipation of the new album. When Tuesday arrived, we would huddle around a CD player to listen to the new album as astute Hip Hop and music critics, and then have a lively critical debate about the attributes and downfalls of the new music, which of course always ended with arguments about who could claim the title of best rapper of all time.

In our downtime, we would push the tables in the afterschool room against the wall to create a make-shift dance floor so the children could master the latest dance moves of the day. I vividly remember arguing with a youngster who insisted that she was performing a new dance although it greatly resem-bled the "Kid & Play," a popular dance from my childhood. These moments were always a fascinating time because each child would bring to the dance floor their own iterations of the dance move from home to share with the oth-ers, which would spark the inevitable disagreement that someone else was "doing it wrong." After much intense discussion, the children would eventu-ally agree and set in to practicing for hours. As the parents arrived to take their children home, the room would fill with pleas for an audience to their daily dance accomplishments. The parents would inevitably give in and stay those extra 5 min to watch their child dance. Furthermore, it brought every-one much joy when toddlers, who could barely walk, danced to the latest song.

The presence of Hip Hop showed in more than just these impromptu dance parties. Often the older children would draw pictures of the city or their fami-lies accompanied by text emulating the shapes and bright color patterns of graffiti. Many of the older children at the center had speech patterns rich in

African American Vernacular English (AAVE) that drew from their Pittsburgh accents, thereby representing sonic indications of their community.

Late at night, there were rare moments when I would reflect with the parents or a few of the elders who worked at the center on our childhoods and what it was like being young in various eras. Now when I think back on these intimate social interactions, I realize that the children of the center were always in the peripheral, keenly listening, learning, and observing our activities. The older children would try to participate in these conversations, but were told that it was only for "grown folks." Sometimes, the kids fussed about not being included, but they mostly resigned to staying close to witness the adults romanticize notions of the past and ramble on about who was the best rapper or singer, how the children's dance moves were once ours, and how much the community had changed, for better or worse. For me, these conversations helped build our collective identity. Although I only lived in Pittsburgh for college, I was still able to connect with the local parents because of our generational narratives, kinship norms, language styles, and clothing artifacts. In this way, the center was a communal space for learning about the past and engaging in the present, for adults and children alike. Through narratives guided by our Hip Hop identities and overall aesthetics, we were "doing Hip Hop" in our day-to-day lives with or without children around us.

Miami, Florida

After my stint in Pittsburgh as the night director and as a substitute teacher, I took my first permanent teaching job in Miami, Florida. While I would like to say that my experiences working at the early learning center were taken into my first teaching job, I would be lying. I was a first-year teacher, and I was lost. Moreover, I was new to Miami and there was much to learn about the city beyond the beach. The school where I taught was approximately 45 min from Miami in Homestead, Florida. As a third- and fourth-grade reading teacher, I had students who spoke variations of English, Spanish, and Haitian Creole dialects. Prior to this position, I was unaware that Spanish even had different dialects and varieties.

It was a challenge, to say the least, to understand all the cultural differences in my room. However, one day something extraordinary happened: I wore a pair of Nike Air Force One sneakers to school. All the students, regardless of gender, ethnicity, or language, commented on how much they liked my sneakers. Thrilled by this breakthrough in communication, the next day I wore a different pair, which received rave reviews. Regardless of the language barrier, I was starting to connect with my students on a surface

level. As a class, we discussed fashion, heavily focused on sneaker culture. Unbeknownst to even myself, this topic became my entry point for discussing Hip Hop culture and affirming a Hip Hop community of practice in my classroom. At the time, however, I was simply hoping to build a relationship with my students; I had no academic language for what I was doing in the classroom.

Although individually our identities were derived from many ideological or social landscapes, Hip Hop was one source of our collective identity. The students already knew how to engage with each other by drawing on the culture of Hip Hop. They wanted to rap, adorn themselves in the latest Hip Hop styles, and create art inspired by graffiti and urban aesthetics. Behind those modes of expression, I noticed that the students were actually exhibiting key learning skills. For example, I heard complex language-shifting skills in their raps as students retold or remixed class readings. They wrote battle rhythms to outwit each other. Thus, weekly vocabulary words were unpacked into vivid narratives that linked a class story to real life situations. Students would rhyme in various languages—always to the sound of drumming on the classroom desks. Along the gendered lines of Hip Hop, the boys had a cadre of gestures and handshakes for social engagement, while the girls danced and performed game-song drawing on their oral-kinetic skills. They also enjoyed when I led class discussions using phrases to trigger call and response. Regarding fashion, if they could not afford the latest sneakers, they would simply draw pictures of the sneakers. In the same vein, many of my students would draw pictures of bikes with flashy accessories and cars with spinning rims. I will never forget the day when I was teaching in front of the class and a student in the hallway yelled out that a car was driving by with spinning rims. Almost all the students in class walked out to see the car. I was left standing in the front of the room with no words to grab their attention.

Thus, my classroom was filled with emotional, visual, linguistic, and creative expression of the African diaspora (i.e., improvisation, call and response, and communal learning) by no doing of my own. I simply provided the space and content. Although my master's research investigated the limited amount of Hip Hop artifacts in formal classrooms in relation to students' culture, I completely forgot my own work once I entered the classroom. I was teaching in a school the state had deemed to be failing, so my job was to raise test scores—period. I could not imagine integrating Hip Hop into my classroom. Nonetheless, it happened anyway as Hip Hop was my foundation for relating to my students and my students preferred why to learn and engage.

In sum, my teaching experience in Miami opened my mind to the fact that, despite the formal classroom curriculum and norms, my students without any prompting or instructions facilitated their learning through Hip Hop. Learning

through Hip Hop's cultural practices was natural, tacit, spontaneous, and provided a sense of belonging for my students from diverse cultures. Our interactions pushed me to grasp that the strongest foundation and source of connection among them was Hip Hop. However, my greatest lesson came in understanding that my students wanted to be seen and heard for their abilities to create raps, to form a common language in the classroom, and to relate to artifacts that represented their desires.

Atlanta, Georgia

Almost 15 years after Miami, I now understand why my research is focused on early childhood and elementary-aged children with an emphasis on how their Hip Hop identities create opportunities for learning. Outside of being a teacher-educator, I teach a 13-week course, twice a year, to elementary students about the history of Hip Hop, the historical reasons behind the cultural practices of Hip Hop, and how Hip Hop can be a tool to address social injustice. The program, *Real Talk: Hip Hop Education for Social Justice*, is housed at a local public charter school in Atlanta, Georgia, called the Kindezi School. I developed the course because I wanted to expose elementary-aged students to the culture of Hip Hop beyond what they hear and see on television and radio. This class has become the site for much of my research on HHBE and elementary-aged students.[3] I started teaching at the Kindezi School in the fall of 2012. During the Spring of 2014, I taught a group of fifth graders for the first time. All the teachers informed me beforehand that these students were "so Hip Hop." When I asked them what they meant, they would just smile and say, "You will see." I was perturbed by the teachers' comments because, at first, I thought the phrase "so Hip Hop" was laden with stereotypical assumptions about my soon-to-be students and the culture of Hip Hop.

On the first day of class, I was anxious about this group because I had also heard a great deal about their unfavorable behavior and classroom pranks. As soon as the class started, with an instrumental beat playing softly in the background, one of the boys looked me straight in the eyes and said, "I can rap." After that, I was surrounded by a group of boys bobbing their heads back and fourth, hands moving in unison to the beat as physical manifestations of their words, knees slightly bent, and feet planted firmly in the ground. They were pint-sized Hip Hop conductors preparing for battle. As I began to ask them all to sit down so I could tell them what the class was about, one girl pulled me to the side to inform me that she, too, could rap. Then, her female classmates began to support her case as one of the class's best rappers. The excitement in the room was overwhelming, so I gave in and we had an impromptu freestyle rap battle. The students immediately formed a circle, I played another instrumental track

from my computer, and the battle ensued. Without parameters, their raps focused predominantly on verbally insulting each other—classic Hip Hop battle style. Nonetheless, their raps were creative and spontaneous. They even had props. One student rapping about what he has and what other students lack dropped a cell phone in the middle of his rap as proof. The class was organized noise. Then, many of the students, both boys and girls, started dancing the synchronized dance, NaeNae. The dance was coupled with a common phrase many young people in Atlanta say: "yeet!" The term is used to show excitement. Before I knew it, a few students had hijacked my computer and opened a search browser to play music that was participatory, sonically bass-driven, with call-and-response-based cadences of gospel and funk music—in other words, Southern Hip Hop. I realized at that moment we were having a party.

By the same token, it dawned on me what the teachers at the school meant when they referred to these kids as "so Hip Hop." The students' synergy was amazing. There were no plans or instructions; they walked into a class with the words "Hip Hop" in the title and started doing Hip Hop. They did not need permission to be, they just were. In that moment, they embodied spontaneity, creativity, improvisation, brashness, and the upmost of self-expression. After approximately 10 min, I called the party to a close. Needless to say, we then naturally entered a discussion about how their Hip Hop identities could foster social change and help them in school overall.

It Looks Like Fun, But Are They Learning?

As a Hip Hop educator and researcher, educators outside of the culture of Hip Hop often ask me whether the students are actually learning in a Hip-Hop-based classroom. I am always puzzled by this question because learning takes so many different forms. The above narratives of my past experiences working with parents, grandparents, and young children are all stories of children and the people who surround them as they actively participate in Hip Hop communities of practice. If we use these stories as units of analysis from a sociocultural theory to view the actions and participation of children within Hip Hop communities of practice, then we are able to see exactly how learning is, in fact, taking place.

My students, regardless of location, were "active participants in the practices of social communities and constructing identities in relations to these communities," which "characterize social participation as a process of learning and of knowing" (Wenger, 1998, p. 45). Building on the work of theories of sociocultural learning—community of practice (Wenger, 1998), intent participation (Rogoff et al., 2003), and guided participation Rogoff (1993)— young children's cognitive abilities are entwined with their Hip Hop

communities of practice. For example, my working and teaching experiences woven within this essay illustrate how students gained knowledge by way of "intent participation" (Rogoff et al., 2003). The youngsters at the early learning center intensely observed and listened to adults and peers with anticipation of engaging in endeavors of dance, debate, and language. Rogoff et al. (2003) suggest that "[i]ntent participation is a powerful form of fostering learning. It contributes to impressive learning such as that accomplished by young children learning their first language and continues in importance throughout life" (Rogoff et al., 2003, p. 176). Through intent participation, young children's Hip Hop communities of practice expose them to sophisticated linguistic patterns that emphasize call and response, improvisation, memorization, and rhyming.

Linguistics scholar H. Samy Alim (2009b) argues that global Hip Hop culture(s) function as an "abstract, discursive popular cultural zone" that illuminates how complex Hip Hop culture is, as it informs "transnationalism, cultural flow, syncretism, indigenization, hybridity, (im)migration, networks, and diaspora" (p. 106). He adds that "Hip Hop headz," or what I would call individuals deeply embedded in Hip Hop communities of practice, use multiple language varieties and styles to negotiate their membership within a Hip Hop Language Nation (HHLN). A HHLN has a global style community that overlaps and intersects with translocal styles of communities. Moreover, Hip Hop communicates through verbal and non-verbal modes of communication (Alim, 2009b) driven by creative self-expression. With that said, rap battles, cyphers, and playing the dozens—the art from of verbal insult (Smitherman, 1977)—presented a range of communicative codes for my students. HHLN provided, especially for my culturally diverse classroom in Miami, a linguistic system with local norms (Morgan, 2004) that allowed all my students to be active participants in the classroom. Through narrativizing, my students were also able to link abstract stories to their schools and home communities.

Shifting from the subject of language, within each learning space detailed above, I have watched young children learn Hip Hop dances through active rhythmic play, which was central to their daily activities. According to Singer, Golinkoff, and Hirsh-Pasek (2006), "[P]lay is important for building social competence and confidence in dealing with peers, a life skill that is essential for functioning in school" (p. 7). Both Piaget and Vygotsky advocated for play as a way for children to foster and stretch their imaginations and create new ideas (Golinkoff, Hirsh-Pasek, & Singer). Vygotsky found that children were able to follow everyday rules once those rules were developed through play. For young urban children engaged in Hip Hop communities of practice, play involves embodied musical practices of syncopation, sophisticated gestures, and choreography that pervade their social development, and thus form

the foundation of their bodily kinesthetic, musical, and spatial intelligences. For my students, regardless of geographic location, they learned Hip Hop dance through peer and adult scaffolding methods that link dance or active rhythmic play to their community of practice. Through dance, children were repetitive practitioners working toward mastery or simply having fun as a part of a community.

Another Vygotskian-inspired concept that is present within Hip Hop communities of practice is what scholar Barbara Rogoff (1990) refers to as "guided participation." While studying Mayan mothers and their children, Rogoff found that children do not have to engage conversationally with their parents to understand their families' routines, interactions, and communal practices. She noted that through repetitive and varied experiences, children become skilled "practitioners in the specific cognitive activities in their communities" (Rogoff, 1991, p. 351). Rogoff (1994) wrote that "learning is a process of transforming participation in shared sociocultural endeavors" (p. 210). In my experience working with young children, one of their shared sociocultural endeavors is the communal practice of Hip Hop as a site for enjoyment, learning social norms, and developing teamwork skills. Practically speaking, through scaffolding methods of dance—such as modeling and tapping into children's prior knowledge or skills—adults can teach children how to work in groups, use their bodies for expression, take turns, and critique others and take in constructive criticism, as well as body awareness and rhythmic skills. Given these points, it is vital that teachers understand that the skills urban children develop from Hip Hop dance and active rhythmic play are an essential piece to their development.

Another piece of transformative artistic knowledge that dance, beatboxing, drumming, and essentially all the culture practices of Hip Hop provide is the art of improvisation. Wagner (2012) suggests in his book, *Creating Innovators: Making of Young People Who Will Change the World*, that the most innovative economies cultivate children's creativity. Many of the social interactions within Hip Hop communities of practice are born of improvisation. For example, in my Hip Hop class, when students used their desks as drums to make a beat for a student's rap, both the drummer and rapper are improvising, but their synergy and intent listening skills put them in sync. Another rich example is when my students "play the dozens" and create gutbusting jokes out of thin air. I ask students to take the same creativity and transfer it to their writing. Simply put, improvisation is an indispensable part of Hip Hop and the engine for its creativity.

Therefore, to return to the question I am constantly asked regarding student learning and Hip Hop identity, my answer is an enthusiastic *yes*, because I conceptualize learning as a function that takes place through intent

participation, guided participation, and communities of practice. From this perspective, learning can be recognized and affirmed by sociocultural units of analysis. With that said, it is important to note that urban youth who learn by way of a Hip Hop community of practice are not monolithic. However, studies have shown that African American students with high ethnic identities are high context learners (Petchauer, 2007). Furthermore, Perry, Steele, and Hilliard (2004) suggest that African American students are academically more receptive and successful when their learning environments are guided by cooperation, harmony, socialization, and community. These learning components are indicative of a Hip Hop community of practice that is racially and ethnically diverse, intergenerational, and rich with learning opportunities for young children to observe, listen, and participate in activities that foster learning and creativity.

A Bit of Shade for a Hip Hop Community of Practice

Many of my students came to school knowing how to encourage their peers, critique their peers and themselves, and follow rules and norms because of their Hip Hop communities of practice. However, it is also important to note that everything within Hip Hop communities of practice is not always positive and does not always create suitable learning environments for educators committed to social justice. I have had elementary-aged students make extremely sexist and homophobic remarks, worship material goods, and glorify violence. Early in my teaching career, I was uncomfortable challenging such negative remarks because of my own romanticized notions of Hip Hop (see Love, 2012). However, as I became a more critically reflective educator committed to social justice, I understood that I had to contest cultural practices that reproduce hegemonic ideas and oppression (Paris & Alim, 2014), or what Alim (2011) calls "when ill-literacies get ill." Now in my teaching, I use these moments to discuss and critique materialism, sexism, homophobia, and misogyny from a critical media literacy standpoint. We as educators must acknowledge that Hip Hop can be a space that reinscribes and oftentimes celebrates sexism and violence. For example, although my students in Atlanta were excited to battle-rap, their raps were filled with materialism and the denigration of each other. Of equal importance, by pulling me aside to tell me she could wrap, the young girl in my Atlanta class indicated that she was worried the classroom would not be a safe space for her to showcase her skills as rap battles are typically male-dominated.

Thus, while I hope this article begins a fruitful dialogue regarding HHBE in the field of early childhood and elementary education, I do not want the conversation to either overlook the problematic elements of Hip Hop or ignore its potential. There are some difficult conversations that lay ahead, but they are needed for the betterment of the field of HHBE and the education of our youngest children. This multilayered situation is the challenge of educators committed to social justice, media literacy, and reflective teaching and learning by students and educators.

Conclusion

For the purpose of this article, inspired theories of sociocultural learning were linked to the concept of a Hip Hop community of practice to demonstrate how young children's cultural activities are sites of learning that deeply influence their cognitive functions. Through this article, I attempted to begin a dialogue and a line of research in Hip Hop scholarship that focuses on young children's Hip Hop identities. I believe that for HHBE to truly make an impact in the field, it must expand to include young children. From birth, children are learning cognitive and social skills from Hip Hop that are not recognized by early childhood and elementary programs. Teachers are not aware of how Hip Hop transmits sophisticated cognitive skills to young children. In fact, young urban children are entering learning spaces with complex language-shifting abilities, kinesthetic brilliance, creativity, focused play, and reflective and critical thinking skills.

The promotion of an understanding that urban children come to school with skills and knowledge developed by their culture is what Bartolomé (1994) calls a "humanizing pedagogy that respects and uses the reality, history, and perspectives of students as an integral part of educational practice" (p. 173). Furthermore, much more research needs to be conducted that examines young children's Hip Hop identity in relation to their cognitive abilities and development. Last, pre-service teacher education programs must help future teachers recognize, affirm, and embrace HHBE, so that teachers can use young urban youth's cultural tools and artifacts to build specific curriculum materials and instructional strategies for young urban learners. This inclusion will demonstrate to teachers, parents, and students that Hip Hop's cultural practices provide a lens through which the early learning experiences of urban youth clearly emerge as brilliance from birth.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Notes

1. As a measure of the impact of #HipHopEd, the session on February 15, 2014, generated 2,664,293 imprints on Twitter.
2. I would like to note that I am certainly aware of the capitalistic intentions of the creations and mass dissemination of Hip Hop cultural artifacts. See Love (2010).
3. To view Real Talk's instructional videos see http://www.bettinalove.com/hip-hop-ed-for-social-justice/

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