

**The understanding of how to engage youth who identify with hip hop culture:  
Education as a political act for disaffected urban students  
The colonial character of today's education of neo-indigenous urban students  
The need for urban school districts to fundamentally support critical pedagogy**

Renewed discussions brought about by our *OpportunINDY* initiative regarding the relation between school success and the rates crime and violence need a shot of honesty. Over the last 100 years, adults have tried to reason, warn, plead and even threaten youth to stay in school. Presenting health, lifestyle and employment/wage factors, along with incarceration numbers and homicide rates, year after year messages on TV/radio, buses, billboards, as well as lectures, sermons, nationwide programs, or crying parents attempt to persuade students to “get their education!” Still, many youth remain unconvinced and disengage while in school or dropout. <http://vorcreatex.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/The-Unconvinced-Generation-We-tell-youth-the-importance-of-education-but-some-remain-unconvinced-.pdf>

Why? 1) the critical consciousness inherent in global youth culture; and, 2) the urban school experience.

**1. Hip hop is more than a global youth culture, or music and fashion; it's a political stance.**

The cultural disconnect between [public schools] and hip-hop...is perhaps the single most important challenge in reaching Black youth who are simply not motivated, interested, or inspired by school reform efforts in which their urban identities are not represented.

~ Dr. Shawn Ginwright, *Black in school*

It is this *critical stance*--built into global hip hop that most local children and youth share—which requires a regard from our *OpportunINDY* initiative for the political aspects of education. Marion County residents and school districts that deny or ignore “the political” can further alienate those youth who are the more at-risk of crime and violence. Districts will only reach the more alienated urban youth if their education is seen and fostered as a political act.

**2a) The school experience: Schools are political sites**

This assertion challenges a local *status quo* that may see this “politicality” as unnecessary. Yet, our *OpportunINDY* cannot deny the political purpose of both private and parochial schools. For example, is not the purpose of an elite school like Park Tutor to maintain the social status and political power of the members of the communities who send their children there?

“What Freire made clear was that schools are enmeshed in the political economy of society and at its service. As such, schools are political sites involved in the construction, control, and containment of oppressed cultural populations. [This is done] through their legitimating function [which is] involved in the construction and control of discourse, meaning, and subjectivities. Furthermore, ‘the more [we] deny the political dimensions of education, the more we assume the moral potential to blame the victim.’”

~ Antonia Darder, [Paulo] *Freire and Education* p. 8-9

**Survival: The [political] purpose of urban education for urban students**

“For African Americans, public education has historically been a double-edged sword: it has been used both as a source of oppression and of liberation.” ~ Pedro A. Noguera

If what Noguera says is true, that education can be “a source oppression and of liberation,” why would our *OpportunINDY* encourage urban students to experience oppressive schooling?

It is therefore obvious: if our *OpportunINDY* is to be taken seriously, especially by those children and youth it intends to help, the initiative requires supporting and enabling the ideas that their education and going to school is a political act—an *existential act of survival*.

## **2b The school experience: The colonial education of the “neo-indigenous” urban student**

Prof. Chris Emdin (*For White Folks Who Teach in the Hood ... and the Rest of Y'all Too*), compares today's urban education with that which took place at the Carlisle Indian Industrial School (1867-1875), where indigenous children were brought to be “educated away from their culture.”

“Black teachers with white supremacist ideologies [are] just as dangerous as white folks who don't understand culture.”  
~ Prof. Chris Emdin

This same assimilationist approach was used by the Australians to “educate” Aboriginals away from their culture. It was used by our government in the Philippines in the US colonial period (1898-1946) to assimilate Pilipino children into America's European-based culture. See “The White Man's Burden” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ONojrs3qBoQ>  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cS\\_4F8QSNU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cS_4F8QSNU)

“[Urban] students quickly receive the message that they can only be smart when they are not who they are. You learn to suppress who you are, but more dangerous than suppression, you learn to devalue the things that make you you. In urban public schools if you want to succeed academically, you have to disavow essential parts of yourself--the loud parts, the parts inclined to challenge authority.”  
~ Prof. Chris Emdin

To Emdin, today's Native American students continue to experience a colonial system meant to assimilate them into Western culture. And, post-modern urban schools are similarly designed to colonize students, he writes, referring to urban youth as “neo-indigenous.” He frames his concern around Teach for America and Teacher Plus programs:

“...framing [the] hero teacher narrative, particularly for folks who are not from [urban] communities, is problematic. The model of a hero going to save this savage other...can [be] traced back to colonialism... It's a historical narrative and that's why it still exists...it is part of the bones of America... And unless we come to grips with the fact that even in our collective American history that's problematic, we're going to keep reinforcing it. Not only are we setting the kids up to fail and the educators up to fail, but most importantly, we are creating *a societal model positioning young people as unable to be saved.*” [Italics mine] ~ Prof. Chris Emdin

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/education/wp/2016/04/20/a-black-professor-offers-advice-for-white-folks-who-teach-in-the-hood/>

<http://www.pbs.org/newshour/updates/what-white-folks-who-teach-in-the-hood-get-wrong-about-education/>

## **2c The School Experience: Contradictions and predicaments of urban schooling**

As Indy touts the importance of education, in many instances schools are actually a source of self-doubt rather than self-development. Consider these characteristics of urban schooling:

- ability grouping/tracking
- grade retention
- working alone
- denial of strengths & focus on weaknesses
- no student voice
- learning that is information-rich & experience poor
- an irrelevant curriculum students must endure & frequently ignore
- a “going to college” culture that ignores poverty

- a “testocracy” supported by corporations
- few chances to be successful while keeping their identities as urban youth
- schools that are not broken, but designed to fail
- students’ culture & community problems are not welcomed
- school choice where neither option is liberating

*Urban students recognize the importance of learning, but many are unwilling to assume the submissive posture in rigid schools which routinely deny them a sense of curiosity, autonomy, culture, and self-worth.*

“What is unequivocally helpful from Prudence Carter’s inquiry [in her book *Keeping it real*] is the assertion that these young people’s way of being and the concepts of achievement and mobility need not be mutually exclusive. That is, as a society perhaps we need to meet these students where they are culturally so they can participate in the opportunity structure without having to compromise their sense of self.” ~ *Harvard Education Review* (Summer, 2007)

Thus, many urban schools are seen as a place that competes with urban and global youth culture and is not complementary to a student’s own identity and acts of cultural affirmation.

This is why urban schooling is destined to fail if it attempts to force urban students to deny their own experiences in the streets and in schools, their own awareness of global politics and economics, as well as the value of their own culture and common sense.

***OpportunINDY’s fundamental support of critical pedagogy: Critical pedagogy as transformational: Making urban education and social justice indistinguishable***

If hip hop is a political stance, and if schools are political sites, then classrooms using a way of teaching embracing this “stance” and educational situation will be what is needed to validate education as a political act. This regard will gain the trust and consequent academic engagement of those students at-risk of crime and/or violence.

What is referred to as *critical pedagogy* provides teachers and students with the critical consciousness needed to recognize and appreciate the political purposes of public education.

Critical pedagogy is a praxis-oriented [way of teaching] and an educational movement, guided by passion and principle, to help students develop [a critical] consciousness of freedom, recognize authoritarian tendencies, and connect knowledge to power and the ability to take constructive action. ~ Henry Giroux, *Chronicle of Higher Education*

Through a critical pedagogy approach, students are not encouraged to accept the educational mainstream, not to “go a long to get ahead,” but to critique the *status quo*. Critical pedagogy enables students to realize their concern with urban education is a healthy response and they need not feel bad for not accepting the incongruities and dilemmas inherent in that public education can be “...both as a source of oppression and of liberation.” Thus, through using a critical pedagogy, both the students and the school are changed; this is truly transformational!

A critical pedagogy stays within the current standards climate while providing real-world examples to help students and teachers realize the importance of working together to actually transform urban schools--*making urban education and social justice indistinguishable.*

<http://vorcreatex.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/Rethinking-the-20th-Century-position-claiming-urban-schools-are-failing.pdf>