



**Using
hip-hop
pedagogy
as a
literacy-
building
tool**

By Dr. Courtné Thomas and Dr. Mirvetk Tonuzi

Research and our own classroom observation tell us that a culturally relevant curriculum is an avenue toward increasing achievement for African-American children. Research also tells us that problems of performance are particularly acute when considered by race. Propelled by a compelling desire and need to address this problem, we went about designing a unit inspired by the hip-hop music phenomenon.

Working as middle school language arts educators at Sojourner Truth Middle School in the East Orange School District, we often discussed the lack of interest and engagement our students have demonstrated with their learning materials and, as a result, their poor performance on formative and summative assessments. Student engagement and achievement were the driving forces behind designing this high-interest unit of instruction. Given the growing body of scholarship that examines the intersection of hip-hop culture and classroom pedagogy, our solution made perfect sense.

A culturally relevant curriculum

This unit we developed, "The Message: Using Hip-Hop Pedagogy as a Literacy-Building Tool" is a five-week program. The curriculum, which aligned to the English Language Arts (ELA) Common Core State Standards, is designed for students with varying academic abilities in Grades 6-8. We will make adjustments as needed to ensure the curriculum is aligned to the recently approved New Jersey Student Learning Standards.

The lessons build students' understanding of hip-hop and its relationship to social justice issues and the entrepreneurial spirit. They are organized as follows:

- The origin and history of hip-hop
- Merging cultural ideas, talents, and circumstances that influence the music style.
- Understanding the fundamental source of hip-hop's existence.

One of the program goals was to advance student achievement on designated ELA Common Core State Standards by 10 percent over five weeks. This goal would be achieved by increasing student engagement through the use of relevant and high-interest materials.

After garnering approval from district administration and the board of education, the program was piloted by a team of staff at Sojourner Truth Middle School over the course of five weeks. For this pilot, the team used the curriculum as an intervention tool to address matters of student achievement. However, it can also be used as an enrichment program. After the pilot launch and the curriculum's publication by the International Literacy Association in May 2015, the project team reflected about the curriculum's shortcomings.

More than 80 percent of the program participants' demonstrated growth as evidenced on benchmark assessments. In addition, approximately 40 percent of the students met the initial program goal of 10 percent improvement on designated ELA Common Core State Standards as evidenced on the district's Model Curriculum Assessment.

While investigating topics such as poverty, food insecurity and homelessness, as well as more positive topics such as determination, perseverance and resilience, students are able to make connections to economics, management, digital acumen and communications that are fundamental to entrepreneurship education.

Entrepreneurship Education

The team agreed that the breadth and depth of the unit could be expanded with a focus on entrepreneurship education. In our effort to further merge theory in practice, we once again reviewed the literature. Our findings revealed that the average American teenager between the seventh and 12th grades will listen to 10,500 hours of rock or hip-hop music.

Central to hip-hop music is a storytelling narrative about the political, social and economic challenges faced by people living in poor communities. The messages couched in many hip-hop songs illuminate the potential for teachable moments. While investigating topics such as poverty, food insecurity and homelessness, as well as more positive topics such as determination, perseverance and resilience, students are able to make connections to economics, management, digital acumen and communications that are fundamental to entrepreneurship education.

That research led us to include the National Content Standards for Entrepreneurship Education and its Performance Indicators framework, adding 10 more lessons to the curriculum. The program offers a three-pronged approach to learning: hip-hop pedagogy, entrepreneurship education and social justice.

The lessons are infused with technology, make use of graphic organizers, close read exercises, research projects, and small-group and whole-group discussions and activities. Overall, they are exciting and robust while satisfying specific Common Core State Standards and propelling higher order critical thinking skills.

Analyzing results

Using a sampling of our students, 22 male and 20 female students between the ages of 11 and 14 were drawn from a grouping of students identified as at-risk for academic failure. More specifically, these participants scored poorly in at least three Common Core State Standard areas tested and did not achieve a passing score within the 70th percentile on the district benchmark exam for two testing cycles. School data further revealed that all the participants in the pilot were eligible for free participation in the school lunch program.

It should be noted that the school is organized in a single-gender classroom format, which has been the case since 2006. Thus, the male and female participants in the pilot were kept separate during instruction.

The students completed pre- and post-surveys to gauge their understanding of hip-hop. Data collected from both the male and female participants was illuminating. More than 80 percent of the program participants' demonstrated growth as evidenced on benchmark assessments. In addition, approximately 40 percent of the students met the initial program goal of 10 percent improvement on designated ELA Common Core State Standards as evidenced on the district's Model Curriculum Assessment. Further,

89 percent of the participants responded that they learned more about the challenges faced by inner-city residents from studying hip-hop.

A female participant wrote, "I've learned more about the challenges faced by inner-city people from studying hip-hop because the rappers talk about how there is a lot of poverty where they come from." One of her classmates shared, "I learned major events have impacts on people's lives and affect what they do."

"I learned that hip-hop started in a poor neighborhood," a male participant explained. Another stated, "I learned that hip-hop has meaning." Similarly, another male participant responded, "Hip-hop is a global thing—meaning that not just one group can appreciate it."

One hundred percent of male participants and 95 percent of female participants responded that they learned more about the background of hip-hop. Another question inquired if their view about hip-hop and its use in learning has changed. Sixty-seven percent of program participants responded "yes." One male participant stated, "Hip-hop has a lot of meaning to it." A female participant explains, "Yes, I learned more about where hip-hop originated but also why."

Other comments included:

- "The lessons were exciting. They helped me learn more. They should do this program again."
- "I learned that hip-hop is a part of history."
- "I hope that we do similar projects in the future."
- "I thought that this was a fun end of the year activity. I hope that we can do it again."
- "I like this program."

- "Hip-hop can be used in math or any other subject."
- "Hip-hop is an academic thing. Hip hop is global. Also it is a fun thing to do."
- "After this lesson, I sort of love hip-hop. It was exciting I love that the teacher showed us movie clips and had us make a project. I actually think that it's my favorite lesson."

The promising results of the program initiative, overall, have led us to conclude that a hip-hop curriculum as a viable educational tool should not be ignored. Shy students became engaged in lessons, but more significantly student achievement grew to a level that reinforces our contention that culturally relevant curricula must be taught to ensure student success.

For those interested in receiving a copy of the curriculum unit, contact Dr. Courtne Thomas at courtne.thomas@gmail.com. 📧

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