

“Deeper than Rap”: Cultivating racial identity and critical voices through Hip-hop recording practices in the music classroom

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ABSTRACT

Using a pilot program in one Chicago elementary school as a case study, this article reports findings of an ethnographic investigation on the impact of Hip-hop based music education at the elementary school level. The findings describe how this program facilitated a process by which the youth participants were empowered through (a) identity building within a community of practice, (b) musical expression as internal critical dialogue and an external critical voice and, (c) a classroom ethos supportive of expression related to contemporary Black youth subjectivity. The findings of this study suggest that implementation of Rap music making as an in-school activity involves creative use of computer and multimedia technologies to develop novel social skills and competencies in elementary school youth and thus, also provides a framework for better promoting learning equity (race, ethnicity and class) with digital media and cultural responsiveness in urban education.

Keywords: *african american youth, hip-hop, digital media, connected learning, music education.*

BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION

Hip-hop culture has continually been identified by media scholars as the dominant voice of youth culture (e.g., Forman & Neal, 2004). Rap music, the most performative and visible product of the culture, is a global phenomenon and a billion-dollar industry that influences the ways in which youth form their identity, connect with their peers, and make meaning of the world around them (Boyd, 2004; Chang, 2007). Urban youth are continually creating and duplicating new artistic forms within Rap music and hip-hop styles that are emulated and admired in youth culture (White & Parham, 1990). Rap music emerged in the 1970s as the voice of poor urban Black and Latino youth in New York City (Chang, 2007; Kitwana, 2002). Forty years later, the genre of Hip-hop is now consumed more than any other music in the United States (Rys, 2008). African American youth have long remained the majority of hip-hop culture's community of practice (Mitchell, 1996); and for many of them, rap music and videos are an important means of expression and identity formation (Miranda, 2013; Tyson, 2002; Ward, 2003).

As a response to the learning equity gap¹ in low-income communities of color, many educators and administrators in urban school districts have sought to leverage the popularity of Hip-Hop music by employing Hip-Hop Based Education (HHBE)² in their curricula and instructional approaches (Cherfas, Casciano, & Wiggins, 2018). This is because 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 (Love, 2015). Thus, the rationale for the use of such an expressive art as rap music in educational interventions is that many urban youth experience intense negative emotions stemming from physical and/or emotional abuse, discrimination, poverty, neglect, and/or other relational trauma that can't easily be accessed through typical Eurocentric music, English and/or history assignments found in urban public schools (Brown, 2010; Hickey, 2018; Travis, 2013; Tyson, 2002).

Even so, scholarly research on music education has still been very slow to explore Hip-hop as a central theme for the classroom (Kruse, 2016); and many scholars have still openly rejected Hip-hop as a respectable art form (e.g., Crouch, 2004; McWhorter, 2008). Finally, despite the richness of research in this emerging field pointing to the strength of Hip-hop to innovate learning in the high school classroom (e.g., Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2002; Petchauer, 2009; Seidel, 2011), there is still a lack of empirical knowledge on how these Hip-hop making experiences can be appropriated in elementary schools (Love, 2015).

In seeking to extend existing literature on the impact of HHBE and Hip-hop pedagogy, this paper investigates the Foundations of Music Songwriting Music Production (SWP) program and its work dedicated to digital music creation and Hip-hop lyrics with middle school students in Chicago schools. This research responds to the near invisibility of Elementary school students in the scholarly literature on Hip-hop pedagogy by contextualizing the experiences of youth in this program. Using an ethnographic approach, I observed the SWP program for six months to evaluate how it affected its participants, called upon their lived experiences, and engaged them in critical media making through Hip-hop music. By better understanding how this program provided an opportunity for youth to express themselves, this case study demonstrates how the usage of Hip-hop practices in elementary school classrooms could prove more beneficial to what Seidel (2011) calls "remixing" education for the purpose of reinforcing the academic engagement and outcomes of students from marginalized urban communities.

This study seeks to examine specifically how the SWP class influences the long-term social and emotional development of its participants. The analysis is a part of an ongoing qualitative study of the program that is guided by the following conceptual research questions (RQ):

RQ1: How can young people's enthusiasm for creating Hip-hop music and using digital media be enlisted in the elementary music education in a meaningful way?

RQ2: More specifically, which practices, processes, and mindsets cultivated by their in-school recording

¹ According to the Connected Learning Alliance (2017), the digital learning gap is caused by racial disparities in how Americans in and out of school access and use technology to improve learning opportunities and outcomes. Definitively, there are three parts to the problem – access, participation, and powerful use.

² Marc Lamont Hill (2009) defines Hip-hop Based Education as an umbrella phrase to describe using the elements of Hip-hop culture (i.e., rap, turntableism, break dancing, graffiti, knowledge of self, fashion, language) to inform pedagogy in formal and non-formal school spaces.

experiences translate to social development and/or motivation of academic learning for these elementary school students?

RQ3: What creative labor performed by adolescents participating in the SWP program aids their critical media literacy?

Connected Learning and the Hip-hop Classroom

In this study, I examine youths' developing sense of self in a Connected Learning context in which young people have increased access to a wider ecology of information, technology, and interest-driven learning communities (Ito, Gutiérrez, Livingstone, Penuel, Rhodes, Salen, & Watkins, 2013). Within this framework, informal learning programs and online communities provide ways for young people to learn important skills, cultivate relationships, and develop their own identities (Barron, Gomez, Martin, & Pinkard, 2014).

Theoretically, these capabilities should provide more pathways for young people to develop deeper identification with a personal interest, develop creativity, expertise and skill, and connection to professional aspirations (Ito et al., 2013). However, there is a need to understand how these pathways develop and how younger learners make these connections between interests, learning opportunities, and formal academic or career goals. Much of the scholarly work has focused on understanding successful learners, but attention is also needed to elucidate the challenges that arise for emerging learners in these contexts (Hobbs, 2010).

Though scholars have observed administrative push back on the notion that Hip-hop music making practices can serve as a central theme for music education in elementary schools, they have also argued that its successful implementation is plausible (e.g., Kruse, 2016; Love, 2015; Soderman, 2012; Thibeault, 2010). These research studies have pointed the idea that the affinity spaces that promote rap music-making activities could utilize an "apprenticeship model" (with a facilitator who models craftsmanship in practice rather than lecturing) that could connect to the interests of students of all ages. Moreover, scholars have noted that because of a subcultural pride and identification with Hip-hop music, HHBE can result in younger participants gaining critical awareness of their heritage and culturally embedded musical traditions (Ciardiello, 2003; Helmer, 2015; Love, 2015).

Hip-hop Pedagogy as the exploring the lyric writing practices of Rap music has been cited by many as a promising school supplemental programming that helps youth with identity formation, pro-social behavior and critical thinking (e.g., Dimitriadis, 2001; Forman, 2001; Gosa & Fields, 2011; Hill, 2009; Ibrahim, 1999; Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2002; Petchauer, 2009; Sealey-Ruiz & Greene, 2011; Winfrey, 2009). Thus, the findings of this empirical research suggest that the concept of interest driven learning and the dialogical process of discussion and concept-exploring based on existing student interests could be useful in middle and early childhood.

For many African American youth in particular, Hip-hop culture plays a significant role in their identification with others outside of their primary system and also contributes in various ways to the crystallization of personal identity (Love, 2015). Hip-hop also provides both a sense of belonging and acceptance (e.g., contributes to the development and/or strengthening of relationships) to youth within school environments (Dimitriadis, 2009; Helmer, 2015; Seidel, 2011). By playing an important role in personal identity development of modern youth (e.g., self-identity, self-empowerment/self-confidence, independent thinking, therapeutic usages) (Clay, 2003; Levy, 2012; Travis, 2011; Tyson, 2002), Hip-hop music possesses various developmental benefits, which help its listeners figure out who they are and their place in the world.

Given the tremendous force of Hip-hop as a global phenomenon, in greater and greater numbers, students at all levels are active inhabitants of a Hip-hop universe (Ards, 2004; Hill, 2013; Love, 2015). Just as educators have recently endeavored to build on the promise of diversity and inclusion by developing critical pedagogy and making efforts to deepen culturally responsive practices in the classroom, scholars have noted that the understanding of Hip-hop music's place in the classroom could stand to mature beyond only high school experiences.

In sum, numerous scholars (e.g., Brown, 2005; Gosa & Fields, 2011; Hill & Petchauer, 2013; Irby & Hall, 2012; Kruse, 2016; Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2002) have suggested that Hip-hop pedagogy as the practice of Hip-hop songwriting and production in the elementary classroom could provide a deeper engagement in critical media literacy and make better use of youth's informal learning from producing and consuming popular Hip-hop music.

PROFILE OF SETTING AND SAMPLE

Foundations of Music and the SWP Program

Foundations of Music is an arts non-profit organization whose aim is to provide culturally relevant, hands-on music education free of charge for children in Chicago Public Schools (Foundations of Music, 2017). The organization employs teaching artists that are both active musicians and experienced educators to go into communities and provide music education offerings for Chicago Public Schools that cannot afford to staff full-time arts teachers. Foundations of Music straddles between formal and informal models during the formal school day's time and setting. The class is given in schools, which have received the "Creative Schools³" micro-grant awarded by Chicago Public Schools to campuses whose administration seek innovative arts programs for their students and currently lack the capacity to offer them.

The Foundations of Music Songwriting/Production (SWP) program introduces students to both the process of writing original Rap/Hip-hop songs and the technology used to produce them. The SWP program creates a recording studio experience in the classroom with trained teaching artists who travel to the school, set up mobile workstations, and teach the students the craft of Hip-hop composition. During the 10 week program, students are provided with studio equipment including an Apple MacBook laptop with three audio software programs: (1) ProTools, (2) GarageBand, and (3) Logic, as well as a MIDI keyboard, studio speakers, USB headphones, USB condenser mics, XLR, RCA and USB cords⁴. The program meets weekly for 1 hour to work towards the final objective of having students collaborate to write, produce, record, and mix a collection of original songs that they perform at a school assembly or music recital.

Student Participants

The participants in this study included 30 African American students (15 male and 15 female)⁵ who participated in the SWP program during the Winter and

Spring of 2017 (see *Table 3* in *Appendix* for participant demographics). In order to participate in the SWP program, the Vice Principal of the school gave the students a nomination letter for enrollment after the students self-selected themselves to take the SWP class. Subsequently, all students in the class were introduced to the researcher and consent was collected via the Principal after all agreed to participate in the naturalistic observational study. Therefore, the sample being observed was non-probability, purposive, and homogeneous, intentionally observed to exhibit the exact phenomenon under study. (See *Table 1* in *Appendix* for the school's general student body demographics). There was no financial or academic incentive for participants. Study procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Board at the sponsoring institution and the project.

METHODOLOGY, PROCEDURES AND ANALYSIS

I observed the program twice a week for two hours each time from January 13th, 2017 until May 31st, 2017. During the two-hour periods, I observed two classes: one for sixth graders and one for eighth graders. Throughout the class sessions, the researcher carefully took field jottings using the mobile application Evernote. Jottings focused on documenting observed scenes, events, and interactions (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 1995). At the end of each class session, I immediately converted the field notes into a narrative-based record of observations. Within the narrative, I recorded the notable events of the day, the reactions, informal conversations, and comments of each participant as closely as possible. I also communicated with the teaching artist to clarify any follow up questions that I had after creating the narrative. My notes were generally related to youth interpersonal communication, interaction with technology and the assessment of student compositions.

Once all narratives were complete, I utilized Emerson et al. (1995) iterative two-phase practice of coding and memoing ethnographic field notes. Initial thematic codes during observation of the song

³ The Creative Schools Certification (CSC) places the arts on CPS school progress report cards. Based upon school-level arts data collected by Arts Liaisons in the previous year, the CSC rates schools 1-5 with 1 meaning exceling and 5 meaning incomplete data/failing to meet standard. Shoreline is at a 3, which means they are seeking to develop programming to meet the goals and priorities of the CPS Arts and Education Plan.

⁴ XLR, RCA and USB cords were used in order control the standard signal flow for audio in the sound station.

⁵ Pseudonyms were assigned to all students and school staff members observed unless otherwise noted. Additionally, pseudonyms were given to the name of the field site and its location.

composition process were guided by using MHA (Measures of Human Achievement) Labs' 21st Century Skill Building Blocks for participatory media projects (MHA Labs, 2012)⁶. These initial codes selected to analyze classroom discourse and song lyrics were: personal mindset, planning for success, problem solving and social awareness. After first reading data openly as an entire data set noting initial field notes, I selected these specific themes for more focused and integrative coding because they aligned with what I assessed to be the goals of the program described to me by the Executive Director of the program.

In addition to conducting observations of the two SWP classes, the researcher held informal conversations with participants and asked contextual and historical information about the SWP program of five teaching artists over 12 unstructured phone interviews. These informal in-depth conversations helped to shape the analysis of my observation by giving me insight about the validity of my chosen themes and key takeaways by those who shaped and taught in the program. The participants in this study were observed over two semesters. Overall, the two classes met 16 times and created three songs that were then mixed and mastered by their assigned teaching artist.

Observation Site

The participants in this study were observed in a public school in Chicago, Shoreline Academy. At Shoreline, eighty-two percent of the school's student body came from low-income homes; and 98% of the school's student body were African American (Chicago Public Schools, 2017). According to the school's 2016-17 annual report, this school ranked below average in terms of overall student attainment, meaning that a majority of Shoreline students performed worse on standardized tests than the national average (see *Table 1* in *Appendix* for more information). Shoreline was "partially organized for improvement", which means that the school's culture and climate had a few strengths, but also had several weaknesses. This school also had a

26% mobility rate, meaning about a quarter of its student body changed over the course of the school year. Although Shoreline, did have a music instructor on payroll, she was not full-time and only provided services to students in grades Kindergarten through 4th grade.

Conducting Research Within the SWP Program

Between 2016 and 2019, I have studied the impact of Hip-hop Based Education on African American youths who have participated in Foundations of Music Songwriting and Production program. Virtually all of the students I have worked with during this time have hailed from some of Chicago's poorest communities on the south and west sides, places deeply impacted by lack of access to digital technology and equitable education. As a researcher who had had 20 years of combined experiences as a social worker, a music educator, a non-profit consultant, and a professional Hip-hop musician, I was drawn to researching the SWP program due to my own personal experiences growing up on the south side of Chicago, as well as having worked previously with Foundations of Music as a community event partner, student mentor and guest lecturer. My familiarity with the organization's leadership as well as its teaching artists, were the very key in my being granted access to the classrooms that are depicted in this study. I have played many professional roles during the full seven years I have been familiar with the SWP program; and for that reason, I very much look at this study as a collaborative action research project aiming to bring about best practices for the program.⁷

In examining my own firsthand experiences while performing observations and gaining rapport with students, my friendship with the teaching artists played a large role in their willingness to speak candidly around me. That said, my position as an external researcher was oftentimes misunderstood by students as well as school administration during the course of my research. In many instances, I was treated by the participants as a teaching assistant, a musical collaborator as well as a talent judge in the classroom. Though all participants

⁶ The MHA Labs Skill Building Blocks are an evidence-based framework that aligns to the types of future-ready skills that SWP mentors explicitly identified as the most critical for youth to possess in order to create high-quality media projects, whether for personal, community, or client communication. The MHA Labs Framework identifies six core building block targets comprising a total of 35 cognitive, social, and emotional skills essential for college and career success.

⁷In order to abide by field site policies for visitors on school grounds, I was given a Teaching Artist Internship by Foundations of Music as a formality to justify my presence in the school building during SWP classes. I was required to complete a background check. I also completed training on being a mandated reporter who, because of his or her profession, is legally required to report any suspicion of child abuse or neglect to the relevant authorities.

that I held conversation with were told during the first class session that I was conducting research on class outcomes, I often took part in conversations and participated in the activities in such ways that my role was perceived as a member of their community of practice.

Thus, while my presence and positionality in the classroom likely impacted these youths' experiences and the meaning that they attached to their experiences, it follows the work of many scholars who explore Hip-hop pedagogy from the observational standpoint of an artist-teacher-researcher (e.g., Irby & Hall, 2011; Travis, 2011). Moreover, the scope of my musical expertise enhanced the participant observations by supporting young people's work in the studio environment and deepened the researcher-participant relationship (Kelly, 2017, p. 59). Additionally, by simply observing and allowing the work process of the classes, I strove to minimize the effect of my own research inquiry on the structuring of the song creation of the students. I allowed both the teacher and his students to naturally report their interpretations of the class to me rather than asking them formal interview questions.

KP, The SWP Classroom Process and Ethos, defined

KP, the teaching artist observed in this study, was a musician and songwriter in his mid-thirties from the South Side of Chicago. A classically trained pianist, KP was also a DJ and an audio engineer who held his bachelor's degree in audio production from a local college in Chicago. When not teaching at Shoreline, he shared with me that during the weekdays, he often did sound engineering for many different church choirs throughout the Chicagoland area in addition to doing random DJ gigs on weekends. During this study, I observed KP teach two SWP classes at Shoreline: one for sixth graders and one for eighth graders (15 per class and 30 children in total).

While observing the way in which KP structured his 60 minute classes, I noticed that he would generally use the first half of the class (25 minutes) to lead students through a five minute lecture and 20 minutes writing time to develop and refine lyrics, vocal, and performance exercises to gain confidence and poise when presenting one's work. He used the second half of the class (25 minutes) to provide students a structured

free time so they could work on their individual projects with the recording technology and music production software. For the final ten minutes of each class, students were given the opportunity to learn how to constructively critique their work, as well as that of their peers.

The participants in the SWP program completed ongoing assignments that were meant to prepare them for their final projects, a finished song (written, produced, recorded and mixed) about their everyday lives⁸. For the first 3 weeks, the students learned how to create beats using GarageBand, Logic, and ProTools. During the following 3 weeks, the students began to learn about song structure and strategies for lyrics writing. During the final 4 weeks, the students in the program learned to record themselves on the microphone and worked to complete their songs independently while KP supervised their progress to completion.

By involving his youth in the development and facilitation of leisure opportunities – in this instance, creation of a song to perform at the school's talent show- KP was successful in engaging youth in sharing ideas and talents, planning, and decision-making, and promoting sense of empowerment in a safe, open, and nonjudgmental space. The SWP program strives in workshops to begin and end with youth participant voices rather than that of the facilitator. At the start of a workshop, this can take the form of a "check-in" in which participants introduce themselves and declare how they are feeling and what they want to accomplish that day. Often, KP also began with a wall-write, which was when participants had to respond to a prompt written on a dry erase board hanging on the wall, such as "What does it mean to be from the hood?" and then brainstorming about the question to start the songwriting process.

After taking time to observe the community-generated documentation, I observed the collective offering, such as common themes, differences of opinion, and styles of self-expression. KP structured the workshops so that participants had "the last word", introducing such activities as:

- going around the circle sharing something that they "liked or learned" during the gathering;

⁸ Similar to DeLuca, Clampet-Lundquist, and Edin (2016), students in the SWP program spent ten weeks developing an "identity project", an interest-driven school project fueled by

their passion for Hip-hop, which was supported by giving the students lessons on Hip-hop composition with concrete actions and collaborating with their teaching artists.

- sharing the state of their projects through playing their recordings or giving a live performance of their songs;

- verbalizing an affirmation (“My truth is my passion/My Passion is my music”).

An explicit example of how the course of a session might look in the SWP classroom is reflected in the following field note (March 31st, 2017):

KP asked each person to name a “positive” rapper. The first to respond cite the obvious: Talib Kweli, J Cole, and Common. The rest struggle, coming up with current, though not necessarily politically conscious, chart toppers: Jay-Z, Kanye West, and Drake. Lil Durk, a native Chicagoan from the local area, raises some eyebrows because of his hustler image but slides in because it’s argued that he “makes money and gives it back to the hood.” KP then emphasized to the kids that they should use these artists as examples of how to shape their rhymes around their selected topic. (The students appeared very engaged at this moment and eager to start writing). He then wrote on the whiteboard “It’s RHYME TIME!”

After deciding the title of the song (“Life in the Streets”) and talking about direction of the content, the kids brainstormed quietly for the next 20 minutes and were very focused when they were filling out their rhyme sheets and seeking to find their inspiration. It was then that KP suggested that the students create a web. (A web is a visual map that shows how different categories of information relate to one another. Used as a tool to help begin the writing process or a research assignment, webbing helped to provide the kids with structure for their ideas and facts). This appeared to help the students develop and improve fluency with thinking; it also allowed them to discover new ideas and relationships between concepts they wanted to use in the song. A picture of the “Life in the Streets” web is attached below:

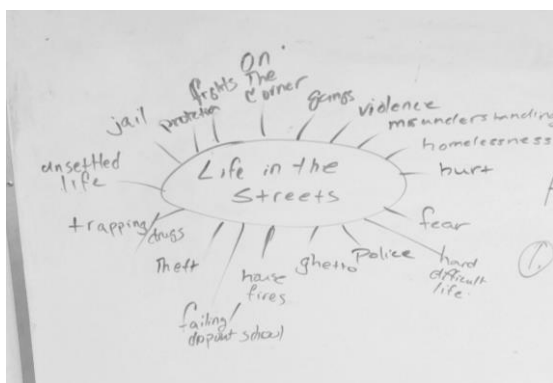


Figure 1. Photograph of the Shoreline students “lyric concept web” for their song, “Life in the Streets”.
Photo credit: Author

The ethos of the SWP Program intentionally is linked to the work of Hip-hop Education scholar Chris Emdin (2011) and his concept of “reality pedagogy,” which refers to the idea that student’s reality is the primary point from which instructing and learning in urban schools should begin (Emdin, 2014). Since urban

youth are typically marginalized from professional success with digital media tools (Clark, 2005), interests of SWP youth and their successes were treated as a reciprocal relationship, one that was constantly evolving and changing. As KP expressed to me, Foundations of Music believes that educators and administrators had to immerse themselves in the worlds of their youth to be able to extract suggestion for their instruction:

Music education typically requires students to be passive...(in this program) The excelling kids teach the others the skills that they’re acquiring the quickest. I really spend most of my time just making sure that the kids stay on task, not teaching. They get information from me but they all implement it in their own ways. They are motivated about the idea making their songs but it’s my job to guide them in a way where they can actually pull off completing something they can listen back to. Hip-hop is not an either/or but more like a both/and... (Field Note, March 31st, 2017).

Additionally, KP spoke about cosmopolitanism as being the tenet that is most important within the SWP program. Appiah (2006) relates this term to concept fluid communication and argumentation within the classroom. KP let me know that communication and argumentation have to be acceptable for Hip-hop making. However, he also mentioned how this often could rub administrators the wrong way:

Sometimes the administrators wonder whether what it is we are actually doing is a form of learning for the students. Or if what I do is teaching...Sometimes when they walk in the classroom, it can look a bit chaotic. Even still, the work of a recording studio often looks this way. The finished product and final performances is the only real way (administrators) can judge the quality of work created. It may seem like we are being loud and playing... but there’s real work happening as they talk with one another (Field Note, March 31st, 2017).

KP adjusted his weekly agenda to the tenor of each class that he taught and did it according to the progress he assessed within the youth. However, KP felt his greatest success occurred when his youth were given the chance to engage in interest-driven projects. Instead of giving kids topics to write or talk about, KP allowed students to lead the process of choosing their song topics, collaborations, and sonic collages. KP explained during one exchange over lunch that he believed *student capital breeds student investment and that this was the equivalent of giving them cultural capital*. In replacing older views of a music classroom with a newer one, KP sought not only to be inclusive to a Hip-hop ethos, but also cultivate a scene that might resemble a creative lab within a STEM profession, or a start-up companies in

Silicon Valley, places where youth demographically similar to his participants are severely underrepresented.

Confronting Power Structures: Critical Media Literacy in the SWP Classroom

For participants of the SWP program, self-inquiry based media production inspired these students to create compelling multimedia examinations of self and community. The shared experience of analyzing and critiquing songs created by one's own peers, considering why these critiques mattered, for whom they mattered, and what difference such critiques made for the totality of the final product, was specific to the work of musicianship in this program. Reflecting on these issues helped students move beyond their individual responsibility to consider the need to work toward structural changes in the music industry overall. One participant, Kenneth (7th grade, 12 years old; Shoreline) lamented the lack of substance in modern mainstream rap music versus that of yesteryear:

Rap isn't as real as it used to be like when Tupac (Shakur) and Biggie (Smalls) was rapping. Migos (a popular Atlanta rap group) is cool but I want to be more positive. Music causes violence around here and I ain't trying to rap about giving kids drugs or shooting at them. That isn't cool. The more violence we hear, the more violence we see...I just don't think it's cool. I make to make something that shows what really is cool and positive in my city. Show people why I love it here (Field Note, May 31st, 2017).

This quote was just one example of how SWP students seemed to not want to define themselves simply as urban youth or as Black and Brown people but as true emerging professionals and seekers of truth in marginalized spaces. In doing so, the participants regularly projected self-efficacy, pride, and optimism of their imagined futures, through critiquing and creating artifacts of empowerment. An example of this was displayed within the lyrics of the 7th graders' song, "No Hook:"

I'm gonna get it like any time
I'm on my grind yeah
You gonna see me shine
I'm at the top
Like Mike in his prime time
Balling so hard
I cannot catch a down town

I'm gonna move my family to Beverly Hills
Move my brothers out the field
They done wake up ask if this real
Ain't not playing we gonna chase for a mil(lion dollars)

In analyzing the lyrics of this song, I imagined these students sought to imagine how they can use their creative talent to create a better life for themselves, their families and move them to a better community. The SWP program was unconventional in that it allowed the freedom to interrogate these personal thoughts in the classroom setting. In many instances, this concept of being organic and staying true was a theme that was often expressed as a rule in their community of practice. To this point, KP explained:

You have to be able to stand in your truth. I don't think we have anyone that's not opinionated. Academic spaces are often uptight and non-biased, but I think that we've all come to the realization that that's not possible in rap music, and that if we embrace our lived experiences, we get to the best work (Personal Communication, April 27, 2018).

When one participant discusses his hopes that a song on mass incarceration might lead his generation to greater empathy, when a participant recognizes the risks of writing about police corruption and yet elects to do it anyway for the sake of her community, when students write songs that are critical of Chicago's Mayor, I found a sense of value that was attached to collective classroom processes. They allowed these youth and young adults to address to a larger collective within which they were participants whose voices and opinions mattered. As is clear from the above examples, although not all young people were able to articulate the importance of providing certain kinds of information to the larger collective, some, in fact, were thrust into the process of experiencing the tensions that emerged as a result of differing views regarding the role that music can play in uplifting communities.

Another one of the major advantages to outcomes of the SWP program was that it did not always depict the typical power dynamic found in a standard music classroom.⁹ Though intentionalities and structures differentiate between informal and formal learning (Sefton-Green, 2012), the SWP program does maintain that teaching artists are learning leaders that serve in the traditional dominant role (Hurn, 1985). However, in many instances, the teaching artists' role in the

⁹ Pinkard and Austin (2008) pointed out through their work with Chicago's Digital Youth Network that models for youth media classes often differ from traditional class structures.

They noted that they generally began with instruction of new material via lecture, guided practice, independent practice and a closing discussion.

classroom shifts between being mentors, peers, collaborators and project managers. For example, to come up with a title for their song, KP asked the participants of his classes to do a word association to shape the content of what the verses should be about. Below is a short excerpt of the dialogue between KP and his students when pursuing this task:

KP: What do you all want to make a song about? Pick a word that talks about the topic...

Student 1: The Streets!

KP: Okay. If you want to make a song about the street itself or your neighborhood?

Student 2: Our hood!

KP: Okay great. If you want to make a song about your neighborhood aka the streets, what are some words that best describe life in your neighborhood?

(Various):

Drugs....Guns....Gangs./...Police....School....Church....my family...history? (Field Note, April 12th, 2017).

The sixth-grade class collectively continued this iterative process of topic exploration for about thirty minutes before starting to work on a song eventually entitled, "Life in the Streets." When being asked the reasoning why they settled on this title, Marquis (13 years old, 8th grade) stated:

I really like to rap and everyone thinks I'm good at it. But, these streets is hard. People be hating on you, smoking Marijuana all the time, shooting guns and the police don't like us. Your cousins even be hating on you. They don't have no life. I wanna make a song to say I'm gonna make it and the life on the streets won't stop me from doing my shit (Field Note, April 12, 2017).

As evidenced above, KP often pushed students to discuss how to counter stereotypes about race and ethnicity, how they intersect with those about gender, sexuality, social class, and nationality. Something scholars say this can shape adolescent ethnic and racial identities (Way et al., 2013). In this case, since KP had a knowledge set that was respected by his youth, he was better able to respond to his youth's interests and elicit criticality in their songs. An example of how this manifested in their lyrics writing was shown within the lyrics of Destiny's (12 years old, 6th grade) song "Royalty:"

I'm a queen. It's in my genes. But I can't fix everything./
People shoot, smoke, and drink. People dying in these streets
But hey, that's not the way things have to be./ OK. We could
come together as a team/ Don't wait! We could end this misery./
And you should listen to me because I am Royalty!

Again, this quote exhibits how many students in this program expressed a theme in their lyrics around actively seeking to avoid pitfalls, ecological and internal that may have negative influences in their lives. Thus, it appeared that the process of making their own professional-sounding, unique media objects was a source of empowerment and confidence in their critical voices.

To this point, Terrelle (10 years old, 5th grade) elaborated on the impact of his experience in the program:

It's funny. You listen to music on the radio and you don't realize how hard it is to make music but once you learn how to use the programs on the computer and you like... write and write... then it gets easy to like be yourself on the song. At first I didn't really like my voice because it didn't sound like the radio but now I like hearing my voice so much. It's like addictive to me to hear my thoughts real loud in the speakers. I feel alive and worth something (Field Note, April 12, 2017).

Listening to Terrelle, I had a clear sense of how this unique studio experience was empowering him, how special the class was going to be in his musical and his social skills development, and how he and KP were very co-dependent on each other. This studio facilitated the opportunity for him to collaborate with a willing mentor to explore his musical influences, social opinions, inspirations, and future aspirations.

To that end, SWP students often shaped songs that allowed them to poignantly speak about their personal journeys, artistic/professional aspirations, and future hopes for their communities from a lens of self-empowerment. An example of this lies in the lyrics below (from the 7th and 8th grade group) that were made by Patrick (12 years old, 7th grade) and came from a song the participants created called *Change the World*:

Things getting complicated
They don't always wanna see you make it
Left the ghetto then people hated
Born alone, destined for greatness
unstoppable, unstoppable
Chi-raq on lots of bull
Don't be no clone, can't be no clone
Gotta stay strong, to make it out on your own.

For Patrick, who, according to his principal, was experiencing extreme difficulty discussing anger, grief, or depression in the presence of others, the music making experience appeared to be truly beneficial. The lyric based activities and personal mentorship were especially useful in helping him develop and in recording songs that mirrored his real-life experiences in

a pro-social setting. To this end, the sharing portion of the class process empowered many SWP students to gradually gain confidence in their self-identity and self-efficacy through the community of practice.

Musical Expression as Therapeutic and Internal Critical Dialogue

Empirical research indicates that using technology and having a variety of instruments available is particularly therapeutic for youth (Dalton & Krout, 2014). Students with anger issues are normally sent to school counselors, security officers, or placed on suspension (Dalton & Krout, 2005). As was expected, the introduction of recording during class placed new demands on the youth in the class. Many students would fight over usage of headphones, laptops or microphones and often would need to be momentarily excused from class activities by KP to the far left corner of the classroom. Even so, KP maintained patience and openness in allowing these youth to rejoin class, encouraged them to collaborate with others and use the technology.

Music technology offers a way into music, specifically composition, which is free from typical constraints and makes the study of music more accessible to more students (Quinn, 2005). For many SWP students experiencing extreme difficulty discussing anger, grief or depression in the presence of others, the opportunity to “get lost” in their music making experience appeared to benefit them. I heard many stories about their musical expression as emotional catharsis from their everyday lives. For example, Jomari (12 years old, 6th grade) told me that he made beats at least 4 hours a day on a laptop his uncle bought him for his birthday.

I make beats all the time. Just for me. I make beats because I can listen to them when I'm bored and feel happy. [...] I feel like when I work, I get away from everything in the world. In this class, I get to just 'zone out' and no one is like tweaking on me or sending me to the office for my music. When I make music, I get to think about life and how I can do better for my future (Field Note, April 7, 2017).

Allowing youth to fully guide their level of engagement in the classroom is considered risky to most critics of Hip-hop in music education. It opens the door for the youth to overthrow the classroom with total disengagement from the task at hand. However, by using the music as a means of escape, it appeared students like Jomari were making critical examinations of themselves

and their community; even if they were allowed to be disengaged from the collective. By constructing and sharing autobiographical narratives and using digital tools in creation of rap songs, Jomari was better able to understand his place within the school and articulate his thoughts without anxiety. During my observations, many staff members informally told me KP and I might feel the urge to police his behavior and/or think he was lacking potential. However, to me, participating in the SWP program seemed to encourage his unearthed independent work ethic.

I also noticed this with a participant named Cornelius (12 years old, 7th Grade); he was very eager to use the computer software to create his own instrumentals but was unwilling to talk with the teacher or collaborate with the other students. On my fourth week at the school, Cornelius asked the researcher to listen to his creation and tell him what I thought of it. After providing him with a positive critique of his beat, the researcher noticed that the student was very eager to discuss the topic that should go with the beat. Cornelius explained to the researcher that he wanted to make a song about his uncle who died recently:

I'm writing a song about my uncle that passed away. He always wanted the best for me and didn't want me getting in trouble. I may not record it here but I want to call the song "RIP Fred." Maybe if I perform it for my mother, she'll feel happy again (Field Note, February 4, 2017).

For Cornelius and many of the other students in the SWP program, there was an elevated level of everyday trauma that the kids were experiencing and that often their songs would be a direct reflection of their social, emotional, and cognitive functioning. In this sense, the SWP program appeared to have therapeutic value for these students. However, this type of expression would be very atypical in a music classroom at the primary grade level.

The experience of being in the SWP program also helped students to be better new media citizens, build confidence in themselves, and critically think about their position in society. The definitive example of this was exhibited in final lyrics created by Tayvon (13 years old), Veronica (12 years old) and Kyran (12 years old) for the first verse of the class's final song *Life in the Streets*:

Life on the streets/Life on the streets, Got on these J's And dodging the heat
Dude on the corner, With nothing to eat/ Feeling so hungry, He can't even sleep

Kicked out of school, Cuz she was a thief/ Mama's so mad, Put her out on the street/ She was confused, She was abused/ Beat on the door, Asking for food

These lyrics exemplified an ability within these youths to critically express their everyday views on the lived experiences of youth who grow up in typical urban environments. Though *Life in the Streets* initially was intended to be song about street life from a more violent and nihilistic view, KP's challenging the kids to seek "their truth" encouraged them to collaborate on a narrative that provided an allegory tale about the pitfalls and contested space of street life in Black neighborhoods. In addition to resisting stereotypes in popular rap music, the kids collaborated in teaching each other about moral reasoning, self-determination, integrity, and critical thought on life's meaning. A song like *Life in the Streets* revealed a striking sophistication of these youths and their awareness of the social meanings that are attached to their ethnicity.

By respecting their Hip-hop identities, lived experiences and prior knowledge, KP created an environment where these students seemed to see an emotional safe-haven and space of liberation. In looking to understand how participants in this program made meaning of their class experiences and applied it in their everyday lives, it seemed that collaboration in songwriting helped these youths pursue their personal "voice", induced positive anger expression, strategies for bereavement, and an understanding of issues of social justice in their community.

DISCUSSION

There are educational achievement gaps between those youth that are typically embedded in Hip-Hop communities of practice and those who only casually listen to rap music (Emdin, 2014). In particular, the disparities between urban youth of color who participate in Hip-hop and their White suburban counterparts are still staggering. Given the tremendous force of Hip-hop as a global phenomenon, Hip-hop epistemology can and should continue to take a significant role in 21st century pedagogical practice. Even still, just as educators have recently endeavored to build on the promise of culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995) by developing culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris, 2012), scholars must endeavor to build upon the initial gimmicky depictions of Hip-hop in the classroom setting. Within this study, my findings suggest that HHBE likely can produce big gains for urban youth of

color, for whom Hip-hop is deeply in their media ecologies, cultural identity and social networks.

Hip-hop as musical practice demonstrates the ability to provide a very meaningful application of Hip-hop perspectives in classroom learning. In the SWP program, while student made Hip-hop artifacts were created as a central activity, it is the Hip-hop worldviews and actions that most impacted learning experiences in the current study. Previous research on Hip-hop pedagogy had focused mainly on the secondary level, but applications to younger students in study appeared to be just as impactful. This study indicates that pedagogies of Hip-hop, specifically those teaching rap songwriting and music production as critical practice, offer very deep connections to many students' lives outside of school and offer different educational values, practices, and implications for elementary school teachers seeking to teach 21st century skills.

Students whom I observed in this study demonstrated that passionate youth can use their voices to have a considerable impact on their physical and social world. Their creation of Hip-hop identities advanced the development of technical skills such as modeling, scripting, and entrepreneurship, but it also afforded them personal agency and synergy with others in a distinctive social ecology. Although in school their Hip-hop identities appeared confined to the SWP program, these students exhibited the capacity to experiment, network, and innovate just as they would in adult physical environments. These exchanges thus helped youth build social-emotional competencies, and the freedom to play within the affinity space of the audio workstation cultivating risk-taking, ingenuity, and initiative.

As Cammarota (2011) stated in his work on social justice through photography and poetry with youth in Arizona, "Young people can acquire special assets, such as artistic creativity or intellectual analysis, to enhance their existence, but they are not any more given than being born left-handed as opposed to right-handed. They must cultivate possibilities and assets in the same way they attain and build knowledge (p. 832)." It is my belief that although the participants in this study were born with the potential for intellectual thought, the SWP program harnessed, enacted, and refined this potential and provided it with the space to truly evolve.

Limitations

One note of caution about research designed to measure the impact of Hip-hop pedagogy is raised by

this pilot study. Because students generally self-select Hip-hop courses as electives, it has been difficult to conduct evaluation research that demonstrates program effectiveness in naturalistic school environments because of non-random assignment to classes and the problem

of selection bias. It is likely that the students who choose to enroll or are selected to participate in these programs by their principals are different than those ones who choose not to enroll. Another avenue to consider in future research in this area is the variance in students' Hip-hop consumption patterns. For it could be that the students in the program were highly engaged due to the fact that they were not only fans of Hip-hop culture but were songwriting and producing their own original Hip-hop music in their personal time at home.

Finally, simply having a strong, charismatic Black male teacher like this specific teaching artist (KP) for these classes could be most responsible for the strong engagement (and depiction) of the young men that were observed in this study. Many marginalized settings in research studies like the present one (e.g., Irby & Hall, 2011; Söderman, 2011, 2013ö) benefit from talented local artists, academic-oriented teachers, and researchers leading or assisting the HHBE curricula. Research has also shown that community mentorship programs designed for Black youth historically worked well partially because of racial and gender identification with the mentor that was provided (Akbar, 1991). This was likely because participants in this type of experience benefited from racial socialization and Afri-cultural coping strategies provided by someone they could trust and who bore a resemblance to them (Blackmon, Coyle, Davenport, Owens, & Sparrow, 2015). Seeing if the observed youth's reaction to the curriculum is similar with a female, non-black teaching artist or whether the program resonates with youth taught by someone without an existing personal connection to Hip-hop would be optimal to speak more to the power of the program and the range of students who might benefit from it.

Even with these potential limitations, my observations provide a large amount of exploratory evidence as to the benefits of Hip-hop Based Education in the elementary school setting. With this study being a first step towards examining Hip-hop as standard music education, all future research would be wise to address these limitations. Though the results of this case study are not generalizable to all children, they can be used as a strong base rate towards creating a framework for Hip-hop music making in urban elementary schools.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I have examined the usage of Hip-hop recording and production practices as music education within the elementary school setting. I have located my work with Foundations of Music's SWP programming in relation to both: the concept of affinity spaces as formal learning and Hip-hop cultural practices as a protective factor for Black youth. The preceding findings show a set of emerging themes that may be important to those researching Hip-hop as music education and, more generally, classroom environments utilizing an art studio model. This paper describes how this program facilitated a process by which the youth participants were empowered through a) collaborative learning through shared media experiences, (b) self-confidence through Hip-hop as critical media making and, (c) musical expression as emotional catharsis. These results suggest that the impact of Hip-hop culture has significant impact on the social identity of students in middle childhood and is useful in pedagogy geared towards them. This analysis also suggests that these youth can more deeply engage with more Hip-hop as pedagogy of artistic practice than as a bridge to another traditional school subject. Overall, the SWP program showed important implications for reframing music education to be more youth-oriented, culturally relevant, and self-expressive.

The social and emotional outcomes of this study demonstrate that a class for Hip-hop composition can re-imagine culturally responsive teaching by using experiential knowledge as an instructional asset in elementary schools, which appeared to have clear benefits to students in this study. These findings extend prior research that suggested that Hip-hop culture was a fertile medium to connect to the interests, prior knowledge, and learning abilities of youth but also gave them the opportunity to engage in more self-directed personalized learning experiences. Building these bridges between formal and informal learning environments of Black youth, Hip-hop and digital media as music education may solve an instructional deficit and offer Black youth off all ages interesting pathways for professional development in the ever-changing new media environment.

In looking forward to future studies, it is essential that future HHBE research is able to further focus on the ways in which youth process and create the messages of rap music in their early childhood because the messages now constitute a common culture for the majority of today's youth. For this same reason, future work

depicting HHBE should also consider how pedagogies of Hip-hop engage youth in suburban areas, rural areas, internationally, and in classrooms that are not predominantly African American. The resounding global popularity of Hip-hop among youth in this study seems to indicate that teaching rap music making as a critical media making practice could be taught in many of these settings. However, this can only occur if educators, scholars, advocates and administrators alike take the time and energy to consider Hip-hop as more than an “add-on” experience when in the classroom setting.

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APPENDIX

Table 1. *Shoreline Academy – Educational Environment (2016)*

Domain	Year	Low Income (%)	Homeless (%)	Attendance (%)	Mobility (%)	Chronic Truants (%)
School	2016	86.2	2.1	93.7	26.1	62.1
District 299	2016	83.9	4.3	93.8	19.2	31.7
State of Illinois	2016	49.9	2.2	94.4	12.2	9.8

Table 2. *Shoreline Academy – Coding Themes for Lyrics and Composition Process*

Lyric/Composition Process Theme	Basic Definition	Examples in the Data
Personal Mindset	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Maintains focus on tasks despite internal (e.g., emotional) and/or external distractions ● Avoids actions that have produced undesirable consequences or results in the past ● Strives to overcome barriers/set-backs 	<p><i>“I’m gonna get it like any time I’m on my grind yeah You gonna see me shine I’m at the top Like Mike in his prime time”</i></p> <p><i>“I hate it at home. I feel like when I work, I get away from everything in the world. In this class, I get to just ‘zone out’ and no one is like tweaking on me or sending me to the office for my music.”</i></p>
Planning for Success	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Demonstrates a belief that one’s own actions are associated with goal attainment 	<p><i>“I’m gonna move my family to Beverly Hills Move my brothers out the field They done wake up ask if this real Ain’t not playing we gonna chase for a mil”</i></p> <p><i>“People be hating on you, smoking Marijuana all the time, shooting guns and the police don’t like us. Your cousins even be hating on you. They don’t have no life. I wanna make a songs to (be able to) say I’m gonna make it in America.”</i></p>
Problem Solving	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Defines problems by considering all potential parts and related causes ● Gathers and organizes relevant information about a problem from multiple sources ● Identifying solutions to social problems 	<p><i>“People shoot, smoke, and drink. People dying in these streets/ But hey, that’s not the way things have to be./ OK. We could come together as a team/ Don’t wait! We could end this misery.”</i></p> <p><i>“Music causes violence around here and I ain’t trying to rap about giving kids drugs or shooting at them. That isn’t cool. The more violence we hear, the more violence we see.”</i></p>
Social Awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Recognizes the consequences of one’s actions ● Balances own needs with the needs of others 	<p><i>“Dude on the corner, With nothing to eat/ Feeling so hungry, He can’t even sleep Kicked out of school, Cuz she was a thief/ Mama’s so mad, Put her out on the street/”</i></p> <p><i>“I’m writing a song about my uncle that passed away (from gun violence). He always wanted the best for me and didn’t want me getting in trouble”</i></p>

Table 3. *Shoreline Academy – Student Demographics (2016)*

Domain	Year	African American (%)	Hispanic (%)	Asian (%)	White (%)	Other (%)
School	2016	97.5	2.5	0.0	0.0	0.0
District 299	2016	46.0	39.0	4.0	10.0	1.0
State of Illinois	2016	17.0	25.7	4.9	48.5	3.9