

Cellular and Molecular Biology

Beyond Music: Hip-Hop a Transforming Teaching Tool

--Manuscript Draft--

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Abstract:	Hip-Hop is more than a musical genre but a movement inherently rooted in social justice. The Hip-Hop Education movement is considered to be one of the most innovative educational movements of our time due to its interdisciplinary nature. As a result, Hip-Hop education has been used as an intervention and pedagogical tool in different learning contexts since it is culturally-relevant and culturally-responsive. The purpose of this letter is to provide a brief overview of successful initiatives that have used Hip-Hop education as a transforming teaching tool to address social inequities in the fields of education and psychiatry.
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To the Editor:

Music is a universal language that can be a useful tool in the classroom. It is commonly believed that music is a powerful learning tool that enhances understanding of material since it improves memory, increases attention, and energizes learning activities. Anthony Tobia, MD and colleagues (2016) at Robert Wood Johnson Medical School published an article entitled, “ Rhythm and Abnormal Processing” advocating for the use of Hip-Hop and Rap lyrics to help medical students in psychiatry identify thought process as it is illustrated in the Mental Status Examination (MSE). The usage of Hip-Hop and Rap lyrics in different educational settings can strengthen students’ understanding of difficult topics without perpetuating negative stereotypes of the genre.

Hip-Hop and Rap lyrics are an effective tool used in the classroom to motivate traditionally disengaged students in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (S.T.E.M.). Dr. Christopher Emdin, an Associate Professor in the Department of Mathematics, Science, and Technology at Teachers College Columbia University and GZA from the legendary rap group Wu-Tang Clan founded Science Generating Interest in Urban Science and Bringing Attention to Transforming Teaching Learning Engagement in Science (G.E.N.I.U.S. B.A.T.T.L.E.S.). The core of Science G.E.N.I.U.S. B.A.T.T.L.E.S. is to help New York City high school students embrace their science-mindedness (term coined by Dr. Emdin). Students are challenged to craft raps that are immersed in science to demonstrate their in-depth knowledge of topics that are part of the New York State Science Learning Standards and Core Curriculum. Some participants in Science G.E.N.I.U.S. B.A.T.T.L.E.S. have candidly shared their struggles understanding science prior to the initiative. As a result of this initiative, students were able to appreciate science and acquire the skills to become successful in learning science.

Hip-Hop and Rap lyrics demystify and de-stigmatize symptoms related to mental illness in communities less likely to engage in mental health care. Dr. Becky Inkster and Dr. Akeem Sule are co-founders of Hip Hop Psych, an initiative that uses Hip-Hop as a public health tool to address stigma surrounding mental illness and the lack of diversity within the psychiatric profession. Mental health determines the ability of an individual to live life to his or her fullest potential. However maintaining emotional wellness can be difficult if one has a mental illness and is unwilling to get help. Through analyzing Hip-Hop/Rap artist Kendrick Lamar’s songs “Swimming Pools” and “u,” Dr. Inkster and Dr. Sule have been able to discuss the presentation of alcohol dependence, major depression, resilience, and vulnerability without the barrier of medical jargon. Hip-Hop Psych has taken the charge to initiate dialogue surrounding mental health and illness by educating the public about the biopsychosocial factors that play a significant role in overall emotional wellness.

Hip-Hop and Rap lyrics are used as a therapeutic tool to promote investment in long-term mental health care treatment. Danielle Fitzhenry, a social worker at Rutgers University Behavioral HealthCare created Freestyle Friday created a peer support group

for patients 18 and older with a MICA (i.e. Mental Illness and Chemical Addiction) dual diagnosis. Prior to Freestyle Friday, Danielle noticed that many patients missed their peer support group sessions and some were repeatedly relapsing. As a result, she became interested in finding different ways to engage them in therapy and found that many of them were very fond of Hip-Hop. Danielle encouraged patients to pick Hip-Hop songs they enjoyed individually and collectively, which led to thought-provoking conversations and increased attendance in the group. More importantly, patients had the opportunity to role-play, express themselves in a meaningful way in a safe space, and become more invested in his or her long-term mental health care. Freestyle Friday became a routine for many of the patients and a place for them to develop healthy coping strategies on their road to recovery.

It is obvious that the use of Hip-Hop and Rap lyrics can be a transformative learning tool when instructors such as Danielle Fitzhenry, Drs. Tobia, Inkster, and Sule are deeply invested in their students' ability to apply knowledge in a practical manner. The Rutgers Robert Wood Johnson Medical School curriculum, Science G.E.N.I.U.S. B.A.T.T.L.E.S., Hip-Hop Psych, and Freestyle Friday are just a few examples of many initiatives that use Hip-Hop as an empowering learning device. It is important for educators to remember these examples do not provide substantial evidence that the actual Hip-Hop and Rap artist has a mental illness. Also, it is important for students to be provided with the song in its entirety. Context is very important in analyzing Hip-Hop and Rap lyrics through a critical lens. Though Hip-Hop and Rap is often characterized as violent and misogynistic, when referenced appropriately as in the above examples, it can be a transformative learning tool if an instructor is thoughtful, responsible, and clear in his or her teaching objectives.

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