



Reframing civic education through hip-hop artistic practices: an empowerment and equity based learning model for black adolescents

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ABSTRACT

Using the Connected Learning framework as a conceptual lens, this study utilises interviews and focus groups to explore classroom outcomes of and Hip-Hop Music Education programme piloted within two predominantly African American urban elementary schools. Three specific themes that emerged within post-program discussions with participants were that the program's critical elements were that it: a) valued student enthusiasm for Hip-Hop music culture and centred discussions of its current social climate as appropriate for the academic setting, b) provided mentorship to see music as an agent for social change and c) nurtured their Hip-Hop identities in ways that were impactful for their individual trajectories. These findings suggest that Hip-Hop education programmes can be supportive to Black youths' critical thinking, individual empowerment and understanding of community. To conclude, I argue that participation in Hip-Hop Based Education programs are a multi-dimensional asset that can empower Black youths for the media literacy education necessary to navigate their social, civic, personal, academic and professional lives.

KEYWORDS

Connected learning; media literacy; hip-hop pedagogy; black youth

Introduction and background

As household internet access and smartphones have become ubiquitous, an increasing number of Black youths seek to master the use of digital tools and technologies to express themselves, explore their identities, and connect with their peers (Watkins 2019). As such, many urban school districts have sought to partner with community youth programs to encourage exercises of creativity and civic action through projects that allow these youth to talk about issues that affect them personally (Clark and Marchi 2017). Prior studies have suggested that these programs can bolster young people's enthusiasm for producing digital media in the service of civic action (Larson et al. 2013; Watkins and Cho 2018), critical media literacy (Barron et al. 2014) and occupational identity development (Sefton-Green, Watkins, and Kirshner 2020). These studies generally depict ways in which program mentors and facilitators help their students think about how they use different forms of media to communicate their public voices to wider audiences about issues in their community and develop skills to ensure their personal, professional and academic

achievement potential (e.g., Rheingold 2008). Though research on community youth media programs has seen a surge in recent years, this research is only beginning to identify and define the distinct processes with which efforts within these programs can specifically support the civic engagement of Black and Latino youth as well as provide them with the skills and literacies necessary for successful entry into the modern workforce (Century et al. 2018).

One theory for change is Connected Learning: developing innovation skills; information, media, and technology skills; civic life and career skills; and culturally-relevant content around core subjects (Ito et al. 2013). Within this framework, informal learning cultures, non-profit organisations and online communities provide ways for young people to learn important skills, cultivate relationships, and develop their own identities (Barron et al. 2014). Under these conditions, young people have reported many robust and meaningful learning experiences (Connected Learning; Alliance 2016). In a connected learning environment, youth are motivated by their interests and able to pursue those interests through individualised, relationship-supported learning pathways (Evans 2020). Peers and caring adults support learning through opportunities to provide feedback, support, and collaboration (Gee 2017). These experiences, Ito et al. (2013) argue, are richest when there are clear pathways to opportunity and when students perceive activities as relevant to academic subjects, career possibilities, and civic engagement.

A growing concern among researchers is that outcomes for Connected Learning are often defined and measured in ways that may not fit urban youth of colour's experiences of Connected Learning (Wray-Lake and Abrams 2020). Further complicating these issues of learning equity is that racial and ethnic groups differentially access and experience schools, something which can greatly affect their performance and life trajectories (Rowan 1995; Watkins 2019). Questions regarding why these learning equity gaps exist, particularly among African Americans, have largely dominated conversations about media literacy, civic engagement and racial representation in STEM fields (e.g., Watkins and Cho 2018). Despite having extreme interest in digital media creation and mobile communication for their everyday lives, Black youth in low income communities rarely have opportunities to engage with digital tools and technologies in expert ways that could impact their individual trajectories or their communities (Rideout, Scott, and Clark 2016).

In lessening this disparity, many researchers have suggested that Hip-Hop culture could be utilised as a conduit in promoting innovative educational media-making experiences for Black youth in formal education (Evans 2019; Peterson 2013; Seidel 2011). Hip-Hop music has also been identified by researchers as an artistic practice that can be a way to teach standard academic subjects while promoting personal agency in the formal classroom (see Petchauer 2015). This concept, called Hip-Hop Based Education (HHBE), involves not only learning to make Hip-Hop music itself, but also to the ways young people learn to communicate with one another, express themselves publicly, establish their social identity as well as generate knowledge through Hip-Hop culture. Even though there are many studies touting the utility of Hip-Hop artistic practices (rapping, poetry, breakdancing deejaying and graffiti) to inspire positive youth development in therapeutic settings (Kelly 2017; Levy 2017; Travis et al. 2020; Tyson 2002) there is still a dearth of research about how these interest-driven creative practices can possibly translate into civic reasoning.

With these issues in mind, this study focuses on the participant outcomes of a Hip-Hop Based Music Education program currently being implemented in an urban school district. Using Chicago arts organisation Foundations of Music and their Rap Songwriting and Production (SWP) program as a case study, this paper examines the ways in which Hip-Hop's artistic practices in formal music education can successfully promote equity, empowerment and social justice for underserved African American students. Particularly, this study looks at Hip-Hop song composition through the lens of connected learning and media literacy education, examining how participants felt the autonomy to cultivate skills related to their orientation for creative labour, imaginative about the possibilities for their daily life and pride in relation to their local communities. These findings strongly suggest HHBE can support the connected learning capabilities, civic engagement and individual trajectories of African American youth.

In this article, I develop my argument in six parts. First, I analyse the existing literature discussing Hip-Hop's place in connected learning and formal music education. Next, I will use the Connected Learning framework (Ito et al. 2013) to talk about the importance of civic reasoning to the identity development and academic achievement of low-income youth of colour as well as their pathways to 21st century skills. In the third part of the article, I will describe the SWP program, the context of Chicago, the profile of the participants and my observation sites. In the fourth part of the article, I describe the corpus of my data, my methods, procedures and process for data analysis. After that, I will discuss important themes that I have identified as outcomes of the SWP program. Sixth, in conclusion, I discuss the implications of these arguments for practice, public education and social policy.

Theoretical framework: understanding connected learning within hip-hop based education

Given the extent of media literacy education's growing popularity in research circles (Connected Learning Alliance 2019) and national emphasis by policymakers (Century et al. 2019), there has been concern over the future of America's education system and its place in the innovation economy. Within these conversations, the signifier '21st century skills' has become ubiquitous in educational policy discourse (Watkins 2019). Even so, previous research indicates that without a clear learning model, outcome measures for 21st century learning are often being reduced to the simple use of (or access to) technological tools and not the level of engagement with those tools (Barron et al. 2014). Unfortunately, previous studies have indicated that seasoned school leaders often lack the bandwidth needed to consider more deeply what learning in the 21st century should really look like in their classrooms (Mirra, Garcia, and Morrell 2015).

A framework that is very closely related to this concept of 21st Century Skills is that of Connected Learning. In this study, I examine youths' developing sense of self in a Connected Learning context as they engage with information and technology within an interest-driven learning community (Ito et al. 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 et al. 2014). Connected learning happens when interests, relationships, and real-world opportunities (particularly, academic, career, and civic opportunities) come together.

In a connected learning environment, youth are not only motivated by their interests but are also able to pursue those interests through individualised, relationship-supported learning pathways. Peers and caring adults support learning through opportunities to provide feedback, support, and collaboration. Theoretically, these capabilities should provide more pathways for young people to develop deeper identification with a personal interest, develop creativity, expertise and skill, civic life and connections to professional aspirations (Sefton-Green, Watkins, and Kirshner 2020). However, there is still a need for research that better measures and defines how these pathways develop for Black youth and how they might actually make these connections between interests, learning opportunities, social justice, their racial identity and lived experiences (Watkins and Cho 2018).

Much of the rationale behind Connected Learning is based on students being given the opportunity to shape academic 'identity projects' based on their own interests. The rationale connected to this concept is that identity projects help to merge positive academic/professional goals with creative identities for these students (DeLuca, Clampet-Lundquist, and Edin 2016). As such, many scholars have suggested that new literacies are needed to define how these types of experiences help Black youth to discover and hone their passions into academic, civic and/or professional interests during the school day (Emdin 2014; Kruse 2016; Watkins 2019).

Problem statement

Arguably, nowhere is the creative ability and achievement potential of Black youth in urban America more visible than in the context of the Hip-Hop music industry. Over the last 40 years, Hip-Hop music has become a billion-dollar industry that has served as the dominant voice of youth culture, allowing economic upward mobility for many youths from low income communities (Mauch et al. 2015; Perry 2004). As such, the use of Hip-Hop as a pedagogy of artistic practice has been shown to have great implications for language, communication, and cultural impact among urban youth of colour (Petchauer 2015; Ladson-Billings 2015). Prior studies have shown that Hip-Hop musical practices can be a vehicle for educators to successfully teach and support 'multiple literacies' in the restructuring of formal learning environments (Roygardner 2017; Seidel 2011). Despite this, it appears that Hip-Hop artistic practices are still largely overlooked as a resource in formal music education (Levy 2017; Hickey 2018). In this study, I examine Black youths' developing Hip-Hop identities in a Connected Learning context, in which they had increased access to a wider ecology of information, technology, and interest-driven learning communities regarding their artistic practice (Ito et al. 2013).

On the whole, research suggests many school administrators in urban districts have shunned HHBE because parents do not generally support their children engaging the Hip-Hop's community of practice professionally, and many urban educators do not see the educational value in Hip-Hop's artistic practices (Pough 2002). Due to these prevailing claims, the assumption among many policymakers and practitioners has historically been that the use of HHBE in music classrooms should be prohibited (Irby, Hall, and Hill 2013; Kruse 2016). Furthermore, when music educators lack training or are without a personal connection to Hip-Hop culture, they have often reported they are unable to explore or explain it with any depth to their students in a meaningful way (Travis 2013).

Even so, as urban school districts have made significant budget cuts in school music programs focused on traditional forms of instrumentation and composition, inner-city youth have increasingly relied on Hip-Hop variations of recorded sound as an informal creative outlet (Adjapong and Emdin 2015; Levy 2017). Hip-Hop culture has particularly served as a positive vehicle for African American youth to share their stories using their own voices, to be able to create and identify with a particular cultural group, and has operated as a means to communicate their existence to the world (Rose 1994). Previous scholarship has argued that Hip-Hop culture also plays a significant role in the various ways Black youth crystallise their personal voice, creative identity (Love 2015) and sense of belonging and acceptance within school environments (Dimitriadis 2009; Helmer 2015; Seidel 2011). Be that as it may, more research is needed on how schools can use connected learning's 'apprenticeship model' (with a facilitator who models craftsmanship in practice rather than lecturing) for teaching Hip-Hop as a pedagogy of artistic practice, as this appears to be a very promising pathway to support the professional aspirations and academic potential of Black youth in urban communities.

Setting and context of the study

Between 2011 and 2019, I was a participant observer in Foundations of Music's song-writing and production program (SWP) with the overall purpose of understanding how this program cultivated critical media literacy in its participants. The sponsor of the program, Foundations of Music, is an arts oriented non-profit organisation in Chicago that partners with schools, community centres and libraries to provide culturally relevant music education to Chicago Public School (CPS) students in elementary and middle schools. Combining HHBE, media production, language arts as well as music education, the SWP program introduces students to both the process of writing original Rap/Hip-Hop songs and the technology used to produce the songs. Within the class experience, SWP participants create along with trained teaching artists who travel to the sites and set up mobile workstations, and facilitate skill development for the students to record their music. The program's final objective is that the class participants will collaborate to write, produce, record, and mix 3 original songs over 10 weeks.

The SWP classroom studio, defined

The SWP classroom is designed to produce connected learning through academic engagement with digital media production, socio-political awareness and civic imagination through rap songwriting. The course members met for 60 minutes, two times a week for 10 consecutive weeks. While observing the way in which the SWP's 60-minute classes were generally structured, I noticed that teaching artists generally used the first half of the class (25 minutes) to lead students through a 5-minute lecture and 20 minutes of discussion in response to the lecture, and used the second half of the class (25 minutes) to provide students time to 'free-write' for their individual projects. For the final 10 minutes of the course, students were given the opportunity to share and/or critique their work, as well as that of their peers.

The participants in the SWP program completed ongoing assignments that were framed as essential milestones to prepare them for their final projects: a finished song

(written, produced, recorded and mixed) about social problems they see during their everyday life in their community. For the first three weeks, the students learned how to create beats using GarageBand, Logic and ProTools. During the following three weeks, the students began to learn about song structure and strategies for lyric writing, and during the final four weeks, the students in the program learned to record themselves on the microphone and worked to complete their songs independently while the teaching artist supervised their progress to completion.

Study aim and research questions

Previous research has suggested that typical public school-based processes and mechanisms are unwelcoming to the instructional goals of HHBE programs, particularly those designed to engage Black youth with the task of creating original lyrics (Brown 2010; Evans 2019). In aiming to explore how learning can truly be fortified through the Hip-Hop Based learning experiences of Black youth, this qualitative analysis on the SWP was conducted to assess (a) how participants in the program felt their experiences in the classroom have (or have not) affirmed, developed or encouraged their understanding of problems in their local community and (b), what the participants felt were essential elements of the program that may (or may not) have caused this change in their personal growth. The present study was guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: Which elements of the SWP program creative labor process aided in increasing participants' critical media literacy and civic reasoning?

RQ2: More specifically, which practices, processes and mindsets cultivated by the SWP program helped participants to critically examine and discuss complex community, political, and social issues in the public domain?

Methodology and analysis

Data for this particular study was gathered using two methods – focus groups, in-depth interviews conducted during the spring of 2019. This study used a qualitative, phenomenological case study (Creswell 2009; Stake 2005) to explore relationships in the HHBE classroom. Yin (2009) explains that a case study approach is appropriate for researchers to understand a contemporary phenomenon within its natural context. For this study, the goal was to understand the SWP program as the setting to critical media literacy, development of self-efficacy as media producers and the emerging presence of creative identity within participants.

I conducted interviews and focus groups in the classroom, recording and transcribing them, before using an inductive, grounded theory approach (Charmaz 2014) to distill recurrent themes. I continually cross checked and questioned patterns as they emerged, testing my tentative conclusions with teaching artists, as well as writing research memos as I went along. I then reanalysed the data through pattern coding (Saldaña 2015). My richest interview responses came when I took specific observations from a particular classroom session to ask questions to participants like: What does this quote mean? Why did you say this lyric this way? What made this class session important to your learning? My coding themes were then further guided by using MHA (Measures of Human

Achievement) Labs' 21st Century Skill Building Blocks for participatory media projects (MHA Labs 2012). The final classroom themes that emerged regarding students' media making experiences were personal mindset and social awareness.

There was no incentive for interviewed or observed participants. Study procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Board at the sponsoring institution. Finally, pseudonyms were assigned to all students and teachers observed unless otherwise noted. Additionally, pseudonyms were given to the name of the schools so as not to give identifying information regarding the participants.

Profile of participants and observation sites

The participants in this study were 57 (35 male and 22 female) Black youth from two middle schools in a Midwestern city: Shoreline Academy and Edwards Community School (both pseudonyms). At Shoreline Academy, Eighty-two percent of the school's student body is economically disadvantaged (free lunch eligible) and 99% of the school's student body identify as African American/Black. According to the school's 2016 Annual Report, this school ranked below average in terms of overall student attainment, meaning that a majority of Shoreline students performed worse on standardised tests than the national average. Students (grades 3–8) at Shoreline scored in the 19th percentile for reading and the 24th percentile in maths on the Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA) exam. Shoreline Academy is 'Partially Organized for Improvement' which means that the school's culture and climate has a few strengths, but also has several weaknesses. Additionally, 2018 year-end surveys by the school district reported Shoreline students having a neutral to weak connectedness to their school community. This school also currently has a 26% mobility rate, meaning about a quarter of its student body changed over the course of the school year.

Though Edwards Community School is located in a different neighbourhood than Shoreline, it shares similar social demographics and student achievement data as Shoreline Academy. Edwards' study body is 99% African American/Black and 89% economically disadvantaged (free lunch eligible). This school is also ranked as a Level 2 school, meaning that, like Shoreline, it was below average in overall student attainment and was deemed 'partially organized for improvement.' Edwards' students (grades 3–8) scored in the 46th percentile for reading and the 28th percentile in maths on the NWEA exam. Additionally, the 2018 year-end surveys by the school district reported Edwards' students having a neutral to weak connectedness to their school community and in need of receiving provisional support from the school district.

Findings

'Otherfathering', supporting civic reasoning and confronting black essentialism

A theme that continually emerged during my dialogue with students dealt with the idea of their teaching artist (KP) feeling like their older brother or 'other father' in the classroom. By academic definition, other fathers are male role models who are particularly interested in the academic and professional success of African American youth (Lynn 2006). Through other-fathering, Black men challenge dominant perspectives by

mentoring youth and providing guidance on how to successfully navigate an America that is extremely oppressive for Black people (hooks 2004). In addition to thinking about how the music industry was a way for them to advance themselves personally, many SWP students expressed how they enjoyed having conversations with KP as a father figure who knew about the music industry, audio software and song composition. Students also raved about the fact that the program was a chance for them (as a collective) to question negative stereotypes often placed on Black people in the United States.

For example, Lonnie (Shoreline; Age 12, Grade 6) commented on how the global reach of rap music about Black life in the ghetto created a market that demands over-use of song themes centred around sex and violence to be successful:

[Mainstream rappers] are feeding a market that demands violent and controversial stuff. Hip-Hop went from being a fad to being like the biggest music in the world but it only got that way by making Black people pimp themselves out. Guys sell drugs and violence, and girls sell sex. What about the poor people you sell this stuff to?

Here, Lonnie's quote is an example of SWP student awareness for the extreme levels of violent crime and high poverty rates surrounding them daily. It also was an example of how students utilised class discussions to confront essentialism, or the idea that they had to adhere to certain negative stereotypes of African Americans in order to be authentic in their Blackness. He mentions how he feels the 'biggest music' in the music industry got that way by 'making Black people pimp themselves out'. In stating his question about 'poor people' who seem to be a big part of the Hip-Hop consumer base, he identifies himself as someone who is not only identifying structures of racism in the music industry but also trying form answers about how to make changes to those structures.

To engage in civic reasoning, one needs to think through a public issue using rigorous inquiry skills and methods to weigh different points of view and examine available evidence (Lee 2021). To that end, many SWP participants used class discussions to have debates about providing representative alternatives to the stereotypes they received in popular music. For example, Kareem (Edwards; Age 13, Grade 7) spoke about how conversations during class about the work of established rap artists that he never heard of was inspiring to him:

When KP was telling us about Saba and Vic Mensa, he was showing us that we can make music about growing up in Chicago in a good way. We can like ... influence our generation and not just to talk about drugs, sex or violence.

As Kareem's comments indicate, participants on the SWP program clearly recognised that though the mainstream music industry was not careful in relaying the reality of Black communities responsibly, there were some local artists they identified that have successfully been making music with more positive and sincere messaging. By stating that they can talk about 'growing up in Chicago in a good way,' Kareem was showing optimism for finding an audience for his music while not promoting drug use, sexual exploits or violence.

As an example of how this line of thinking also occurred for female students, Nia (Edwards; Age 11, Grade 6) shared during one class discussion about her desire to create a song about her life growing up as a female on Chicago's Westside:

Our song is about our everyday life out west but I didn't know if people really want to hear about that. So, we decided to make some lyrics people could geek out to when they don't wanna feel turned up or sexy.

As a response to Nia, many female students responded by expressing interest in running their own music companies as a way to promote more music that highlights a broader portrayal of Black womanhood. Raquel (Edwards; Age 11, Grade 6) was one of those who commented about this in the focus group:

I want to own a record label. One where we don't like . . . diss each other . . . or do drill . . . We can do what majors (record labels) don't because they don't target us. None of the artists you named is big. People like City Girls or Meg the Stallion is all you hear on the radio and they only really talk about partying, taking people boyfriends and scamming dudes for money.

Thus, in this instance by letting the youth take charge of discussion topics, KP was able to create a class environment that was more engaged, equitable and critical. Both Raquel and Nia were able to form feminist critiques of the Hip-Hop music industry while also imagining how they could provide solutions of to the issues they described. In doing so, the young girls fostered a safe space for other females in the class to freely share their thoughts and opinions.

For KP, confronting problematic legacies of Hip-Hop past (like misogyny and violence in lyrics) meant centring historical context in classroom activities and asking students about how the authentic problems and issues of controversy in Hip-Hop related to the history of structural inequality for Blacks in America. KP then urged them to let these discussions and inquiries drive their self-expression. For this reason, students stated they thought deeply about how to create narratives counter to mainstream rap trends of violence and gang involvement. Wade (Shoreline Grade 8, Age 14) spoke of this in relation to helping lower violence his own community:

There's no way that I'm going to support anyone that talks violence in their music. And if they not really about that life, I am going to call them out for it. Where I am from people die over words. I want to use my voice to talk about the flipside of that.

For Wade, creating music in the classroom was also an opportunity for him to be empowered to believe in himself as a capable student. He elaborated on this:

Most of the people in our school have been counted out in some sort of way. Even by our own teachers and our parents! To be a part of this program was the chance for me to show people that I do have a talent that's worth something. It may not be geometry or Algebra but it still matters.

In these two quotes, Wade explains that he thinks Hip-Hop is a genre of music that is important to his academic endeavours because it allows him to think about how to interrupt the violence in his community and overcome feelings of disregard in academic spaces. This type of counter-storytelling is necessary because it centres the experiences of Black people and other people of colour, but it confronts narratives that caricature people of colour in negative ways (Hicks-Tafari 2018). As such, Wade expressed a level of personal and educational growth in the SWP program that allowed him to use civic reasoning to foster a sharper criticality for media production and consumption.

There are deeply embedded norms and values in the popular music industry that reinforce racial discrimination, normalise anti-blackness and reproduce social inequality.

Even so, prior research has shown that when authoritative figures in a child's life censure conversations about rap music, they are often turning a deaf ear to the potential for Hip-Hop culture to produce critical thinking (Campbell 2005). Though Hip-Hop has roots in many environments rampant with drugs and violence, SWP students appeared to understand it also to hold the potential to inspire counter-narratives and empower the academic pursuits of those from those environments. Ultimately, by facilitating this continuing collective dialogue in the classroom, students continually expressed that KP was a critical element to cultivating critical media literacy in ways that supported equity and social justice as central to their Hip-Hop artistic practice.

Nurturing social consciousness

In the article 'Mr. Nigger: The Challenges of Educating African American Males in American Society,' Jenkins (2006) discusses Hip-Hop's merit as an alternative space of intellectual inclusion for Black men. Unfortunately, many of the youth throughout my focus groups often expressed feelings of intellectual inferiority on multiple levels. However, they also said that the SWP classroom enabled them to see their expertise in Hip-Hop as a valuable asset to their academic learning, their local communities and career interests. For example, Junie made a poignant observation when asked what the benefits were to having the SWP class:

Imagine if someone like Lil Durk or Chief Keef had this class? They probably wouldn't have dropped out of school! These are artists that made it out of CPS and left because their teachers didn't care about their music because they talk about gang stuff. They thought they were stupid. Now they are making millions of dollars doing it!

While beyond the school walls many youths in this study were regularly involved in some conversations related to Hip-Hop culture, a majority of participants reported that school, the space where intellectual maturation should be performed, often failed to capitalise on a vital cultural practice that is central to Hip-Hop culture – dialogue. Lemario (Shoreline Grade 8, Age 13) spoke about how he appreciated the chance to speak freely about issues important to him:

The best thing about this class is that we get to talk about real stuff. Like stuff that really matters to us. We could talk about how police treated us, our favorite artists at the moment, gang activity in our hood or why people smoke marijuana. Nothing was off limits and KP always keep it one hundred (percent) with us if he thought what were saying was against what he believed.

During our one-to-one interview, teaching artist KP explained that he felt the most effective results in his classroom happened when he followed up on student-led discoveries with discussions and activities that promoted true reflection about those discussions:

Many of these kids don't even have an experience with using Hip-Hop to be critical about social issues. They only know a more gang violence centered, club-hopping and drug taking type of rap. I simply asked them questions ... and often challenged them to think deeper about what they produce and/or consume.

KP went on to explain to me that, although the one of his students in the SWP program was considered by the school staff to be 'bad' 'at-risk' and/or 'remedial', the critical

concepts that she discussed during their class sessions indicated an aptitude for learning that was more than adequate when engaged with themes respectful of her lived experience:

Amaya, who you met during one of our early sessions at the school, was probably considered by the principal to be the biggest troublemaker at the school. No one wanted her to be in their classes because she was disruptive, oppositional and defiant. With all that said, she probably was my best student since I have been teaching in this program. She made about 5 songs about growing up in Austin, made plenty of beats for her peers and consistently contributed to class discussions about race, social justice and misogyny in rap.

Taking on a creative identity as a producer allowed many, like Amaya, both a sense of autonomy, and a way to re-imagine and redefine oneself in a new, positive, and affirming way. This opportunity is significant, as students who experience trauma and struggle academically or socially, may be labelled, diagnosed, or negatively stigmatised by others (school staff, mental health clinicians, community, or family members) and not be recognised for other talents or capacities they may possess or develop.

To that point, Wade shared his feelings about why he felt so strongly about the benefits of the SWP and how it increased his school participation:

I would never be at a school banquet like this (normally, I really wouldn't be caught dead doing anything school related, really. This program was really the only reason I was coming to school this year. I felt respected (by people at school).

Given autonomy, the SWP program participants showcased a determination to learn and much criticality when allowed to engage in self-regulated learning. During many parts of the class curriculum, SWP students routinely were allowed to use the full class period to plan their workday with the equipment, perform a task, monitor performance and ultimately, reflect on the experience with their peers (See Figure 3). This is something many students stated made them feel empowered. During our one-to-one meeting after his focus group, Randy (Age 12, Grade 7) commented about how he appreciated independent study in the classroom:

It was like it was our classroom. I ain't never had nobody that really cared about what I think, or how I was doing ... In this class, we always talk about shit that's going on in our life or in the world or whatever ... I can't really explain it but it really made me look forward to coming to school to do my own personal projects.

Moreover, though many people have described Hip-Hop as a negative type of music to stay away from, the students talked about how the SWP program helped them to see how participation in Hip-Hop culture can also serve as a healthy exercise that is beneficial to learning and development. To that end, Raquel commented:

Kendrick Lamar won a Pulitzer. I read about how some kid at Harvard did a rap mixtape to graduate. You (the researcher) mentioned to us about how someone did their dissertation as a rap performance. I think KP is like ... inspiring us to like ... to do great things like that.

Beyond getting the chance to learn about how to make music, many participants spoke of the SWP program as being an opportunity to publicly communicate and make meaning of their personal stories. Storytelling sustains and directs how we understand our past self and how we transcend that self-moving forward (Baym 2018, 39). To that end, in many

instances, songs served as public memorials for peers who were victims of gun violence, pleas for peers to receive restorative justice while incarcerated or on trial and also critiquing the practices of law enforcement towards Black men in Chicago. When discussing his feelings about a deceased older brother, Wade stated to me:

Bro, it was fun to make my music but it just made me think about all the stuff my brother should have done. If he would have just listened to my mom and dad he could be graduating, playing basketball and headed to a community college or something. That's why I dedicated that song to him ...

When group identities are collectively believed in, groups tend to behave collectively (e.g., Scheitle, Corcoran, and Halligan 2018). In other words, group identity can often lead to group cohesion and vice versa. Many students in the SWP program spoke about feeling as though they could now excel in their schoolwork because they felt their interests were being taken seriously by some of the adults they interacted with regularly.

Overall, students indicated that the SWP program valued their voices by respecting and drawing on their everyday lived experiences. They also suggested that KP's instruction provided civic learning by employing project-based, inquiry-oriented curricula and practices that centred around complex social issues that were meaningful to them. By providing these opportunities to these youth, who mostly came from communities where access to legitimate success is few and far in between, the program promoted Hip-Hop intellect and created a safe space for students to celebrate their Blackness and express their innermost uncensored feelings about society and their place within it.

At the onset, Foundations of Music's main objective of the SWP program was to get students comfortable with the technology and creative strategies used to make professional quality music. Unintentionally, however, a main outcome of the program was that many students were taught how to be empowered media makers: to develop a public voice and articulate their thoughts on social and personal issues in a constructive (and professional) manner. For participants of the SWP program, the experience of also analysing and critiquing media created by one's own peers, considering why these critiques matter, for whom they matter, and what difference such critiques make for the community, was specific to the songwriting and production process.

Limitations

This study's qualitative design has inherent limitations which include potential threats to internal validity: i.e., social desirability bias, maturation, and history. This study relies on self-reported data and is subject to social desirability bias. Given that this study assesses the growth of students across the year, maturation was a potential threat to its internal validity. The students naturally have matured over the course of the project, leading to some growth that is not relative to course participation. That said, history also posed a threat to internal validity in this study. Given the potential impact of events that happened outside the classroom, such as police shootings and school closings, the timing of these news events most likely contributed to the emotional and stress responses of my participants, as well as impacting the topics of their everyday conversations.

Additionally, although this study has a relatively sizeable sample, caution for selection bias also needs to be taken. Because the students in this study were placed in this Hip-Hop

based school programs as an elective, I cannot factually demonstrate the SWP program's effectiveness in naturalistic school environments because there was no random assignment (Evans 2019). Thus, in this study, it is likely that students that are enrolled in the SWP program were vastly different than those who choose not to enrol/weren't selected to enrol.

Finally, since this study was ethnographic in nature and governing institutions limited the settings with which I could observe, engage or interview CPS students and staff, I have no specific indicators of their individual academic achievement outside of the SWP classroom. Though all of these obstacles limited the depth of my findings in this study, I believe the findings could be transferable to other contexts and might inform and positively complicate discussions related to vernacular music, Hip-Hop, and music education.

Implications for practice and conclusion

Interest driven creative practices don't always naturally translate to work in formal contexts, sustainable income or a career path. Additionally, making songs about social issues doesn't necessarily translate to becoming a social activist. Even so, there's still a need to develop forms of education to help youth address creative identities and social problems as they learn at school. The SWP students expressed sincere joy for the ways that the class allowed them to become more academically engaged and civic minded. The class also appeared to inspire them to want and expect for more out of their learning experiences. Through the Hip-Hop songwriting process, SWP participants self-reported that Hip-Hop literacies provided them with multiple pathways to personal empowerment for Black youth. Additionally, their narratives suggest Hip-Hop as music education can positively impact the existing learning equity gap separating African American students and their White counterparts.

In this paper, I have presented narratives of SWP participants, who continually dialogued with one another about what is going on in their respective territories and view these events from the perspective of the community members they regularly interact with. In trusting their teaching artist as an 'other-father', students described their SWP music making process as being legitimate, encouraging their activism over alienation and scepticism. The youth continually reflected on how much they appreciated having this opportunity, even though they were sceptical if it would happen regularly, if ever again. Even so, it was the authentic dialogue of the program that led to the epiphanies about community dynamics that potentially may change the life course of these youth.

In considering the broader implications of this study, these results suggest that policy-makers must prioritise schools as safe spaces and create more contexts where positive youth development can take place for Black youth. These findings also affirm prior studies that suggest Black youth are developing Hip-Hop identities in ways that are tied to expertise in popular culture, developing critical media literacy and creativity in academic spaces. A common element to the critical approaches depicted in this study are the emphasis on allowing youth of colour to 'open up' in educational spaces and authentically share aspects of their identity to the world around them.

However, does the cultural relevance of school offerings translate to creating civic reasoning or media literacy in Black youth? Teaching, learning, and practice in Hip-Hop can differ from other popular and vernacular genres (Söderman and Folkestad 2004;

Thompson 2012). The findings of my research suggest the SWP program classroom model helped participants to participate in the public sphere through two critical elements: imagining community solutions and participation in critical dialogue with internal collaborators for external audiences. By engaging students in this learning environment, students were given an opportunity to hone a craft and authentically develop their occupational identity simultaneously while gaining important skills in language, creative arts and media literacy.

Even so, it's also important to note that my observations of the SWP program did not provide evidence of a standard sequential pathway to individual success. By focusing on consequential connections (see Ito et al. 2015), I believe this study brings attention to social and cultural contexts of Black youth (through Hip-Hop) rather than their individual skills, capacities, and/or ladders of engagement in the classroom.¹ Future research on Hip-Hop communities of practice should emphasise how participants explicitly make connections between formal and informal settings, as well as build links to professional communities. While in-school programs are strong in skill development, out-of-school settings create stronger interpersonal bonds and emphasise ownership, identity, and initiative. Ideally both go hand-in-hand in influencing identity development as well as understanding one's public voice. Clearly, more research needs to be done, both within the United States and internationally, around the connections amongst popular culture, in- and out-of-school literacies, and the implications of these connections on issues of learning equity for Black youth. Nonetheless, this study presents a strong case that Hip-Hop artistic practices can and should be used to create media literacy educational spaces that challenge traditional conceptions of civic engagement and academic knowledge, while reimagining the urban schools as a site of possibility for Black youth.

Note

1. Ito et al. (2015) call out the importance of consequential connections, or the importance of building contexts where youth capacities in affinity spaces/networks can be meaningfully applied and exercised in formal academic spaces.

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