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Popular Cultural Milieu Illustrated Through a Hip-Hop Culturally Values-Driven Pedagogy

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Chapter 50: Popular Cultural Milieu Illustrated Through a Hip-Hop Culturally Values-Driven Pedagogy

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“2Pac,” “Lil Wayne,” and “Lil’ Kim” enter your classroom. They seem to be high on marijuana; are dressed in modern, hip attire; and are fashionably late to your classroom. As always, they like to sit in the back of the room talking, laying their heads down onto the desk, or “chilling” nonresponsively to the lessons taking place within your setting. Does this sound familiar? It should, as numerous studies have raised concern about the critical engagement, initiative, and performance of low-income minority students, particularly those attending urban schools. Absenteeism and dropout rates among low-income minority students raise concerns about their attitudes toward curriculum and instruction. Many low-income urban minority youth appear to have no connection with or interest in schooling and the learning process (Shujja, 1996). Despite these challenges, there are a lot of positive benefits of having a 2Pac, Lil Wayne, and Lil’ Kim in a classroom when the curriculum is engaging. The use of a hip-hop culturally responsive pedagogy and curriculum helps involve and intellectually influence the academic engagement of “challenged” minority learners within a classroom (Emdin, 2010). The enactment of this effective, engaging, and responsive curriculum can address concerns about students with social-emotional issues or school-related problems. The “real” strengths of providing students with a hip-hop culturally values-driven (CVD) curriculum—a derivative of culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy—is that it materializes success through engaging students’ investment with the classroom practice, addresses their attitudes toward the learning process, and builds relational capital among participants in the academic environment (Ali & Ryan, 2013), which is the focus of this chapter.

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Contemporary Concerns and Contexts

Educators are no longer charged with implementing the proverbial “reading, writing, and arithmetic” pedagogy alone. American schools and classrooms have increasingly become sites for teachers to adopt multiple identities and expertise that extend beyond traditional content instruction to include “teaching” about concepts such as social justice, social responsibility, and social-emotional development. The latter concept is particularly salient as American classrooms are increasingly populated with diverse learners with diverse social-emotional needs, which impact student learning, engagement, and responsiveness.

Social-emotional development can be understood as a symbiotic relationship with self and other social beings. It is a set of competencies that focuses on the ability to (1) identify and understand one’s own feelings, (2) manage strong emotions and their expression in a constructive manner, (3) develop empathy for others, and (4) establish and maintain interpersonal relationships (Cooley-Strickland et al., 2009). Many teachers and schools are now charged with cultivating and disseminating “social skills” curriculum designed to complement traditional instruction with the hopes of developing students’ competencies in both academic subjects *and* pro-social responsiveness to other human beings. National initiatives such as the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) speak to the primacy of schools as receptacles for promoting social-emotional development as its mission is “to help make evidence-based social and emotional learning an integral part of education from preschool through high school” (CASEL, 2014).

Despite teachers having a conceptual understanding of social-emotional development garnered in formal postsecondary education, many, particularly those who teach in urban, inner cities, lament how to best support students who need extensive social-emotional support. According to the Center for Public Education (n.d.), 5.7 million children aged 6 to 12 received special education services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in the fall of 2008. More importantly, 7.2%, or over 400,000 American children, were diagnosed with an emotional disturbance. Under the IDEA, children with emotional disturbances include those who lack the ability to maintain interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers, display a

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persistent depressive mood, and/or are diagnosed with schizophrenia. While emotional disturbances manifest broadly across students, African Americans and males are overrepresented in receiving services in schools under this category. The implications for inner city teachers in large cities such as Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles are particularly noteworthy as these school districts are more likely to instruct and "label" African Americans, males in particular, as emotionally disturbed.

In addition to manifestations of social-emotional health, teachers are also privy to community factors that impact children's social-emotional development. Community-based violence, in particular, may impact students' ability to learn. In a path-breaking study on violence, Carl C. Bell and Esther J. Jenkins (1991) described three types of community-based violent experiences that impact Chicago youth: victimization, witnessing, and hearing. Victimization is a form of direct violence and includes deliberate acts intended to cause harm or death. Witnessing and hearing about violence can be considered a form of indirect violence with the former conceptualized as observing harmful interpersonal acts firsthand and the latter experienced aurally through hearsay, conversation, and even radio news programs. According to Julie L. Crouch and colleagues (2000), race is a strong predictor of children witnessing violence with 57% of the African American children witnessing violence compared to 50% of the Latinos and 34% of the Caucasians (Crouch et al., 2000). Furthermore, this trinity of community violent experiences can interfere with student learning and engagement and contribute to mental health challenges such as anxiety, depression, and substance abuse (Cooley-Strickland et al., 2009).

Although media found online can serve as classroom resources for educators and students, recent scholarship also suggests the plethora of media, particularly social media, consumed by students impacts their social, emotional (or social-emotional), and intellectual development (Buckingham, 2007). Youth and adolescents' affinity for following friends and celebrities on social media sites such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter may lead to depression and anxiety (O'Keefe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011). Frequent perusing of such sites in isolation distinguished by continuously viewing the lifestyles of peers and **[p. 409 ↓]** celebrities may compromise feelings of self-esteem and generate feelings of self-doubt for some youth. Hypersexualized content of music videos, social media "posts," and "sexting" can lead to premature sexual experiences and feelings of confusion and social withdrawal. Cyber-bullying, a form of peer-topeer

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digital harassment, has been shown to increase student's depression, anxiety, and even lead to suicide attempts (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010).

Thus, to support students formally diagnosed with emotional challenges, students undiagnosed yet still exhibiting emotional disturbances due to community violence, and students subconsciously impacted by incessant media consumption, schools and teachers must begin to summon innovative teaching practices. Given technology's increasing influence on American children, using hip-hop as a form of pedagogy may support positive social-emotional development among youth to aid in classroom engagement, processing, and content mastery.

Theoretical Perspectives for Developing a CVD Curriculum and Pedagogy

What exactly is a curriculum and pedagogy that is CVD and how can it be used to empower a hip-hop perspective? Essentially a CVD model allows educators to listen to students' needs, address those needs, and connect an educator to a student's culture. Lessons within the classroom are tailored to support the community in a more meaningful way by adding students' voices and cultural perspectives to the instructional narrative. This model of teaching allows the educator to learn who the students are and to relate the curriculum to their needs. What makes this an effective pedagogy is that it provides youth with more options within a learning environment. Applying a hip-hop perspective to this pedagogy empowers young people's ability to navigate through a curriculum integrating their experiences and social observations within an educational community. In particular, the usage of a CVD model incorporating a hip-hop modality in a literacy or social studies class has the potential to increase minority students' level of engagement, classroom dialogue, and intellectual participation within the academic setting. This learning model further provides minority youth a connecting bridge to school because youth are better able to transfer their experiences, values, and perspectives to academic learning outcomes (Gillborn & Ladson-Billings, 2009). According to researchers, a culturally relevant education model allows students to personalize their learning experiences while improving their perspective toward school (Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003). As a practice, when educators are able to

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construct a curriculum integrating hip-hop messaging, it presents meaning and value for young people. Students' cultural language, view, and perspectives from hip-hop only strengthen literacy and social studies learning opportunities.

Instructional Vibrancy

When adopting a hip-hop culturally responsive pedagogy, the curriculum establishes an art-integrated practice because of the injection of creative auditory and visual stimuli into the academic setting. This helps connect students with the lessons being taught (Kitwana, 2002). There exists vibrancy and "elastic impression" on students to relate to what the teacher is doing in the classroom when hip-hop emerges as part of the study or educational lesson. Several studies by Marc Lamont Hill and Emery Petchauer (2014) reviewed classroom cultures that infused lyrics into their literacy assignments. Students not only evaluated the context and inferences used from the lyrics but also were able to deconstruct the narrative or message delivered by the artist. Educators applying this practice of connecting students to literacy eventually align the information to required text or readings.

For example, educators can infuse the East and West Coast lyrical hip-hop rivalries into the study of literature by comparing them to Beowulf's boast poem of how this medieval epic hero victoriously defeated his adversary Grendel. 2Pac (1996) declared in his song "Hail Mary":

> I'm a ghost in these killin' fields/Hail Mary catch me if I go, let's go deep inside/The solitary mind of a madman who screams in the dark/Evil lurks, enemies, see me flee/Activate my hate, let it break, to the flame/ Set trip, empty out my clip, never stop to aim.

It sounds similar to the message in Beowulf declaring:

> Death is not easily escaped/Try it who will/But every living soul among the children of men dwelling upon **[p. 410 ↓]** the earth goeth of necessity/Unto his destined place where the body/Fast in its narrow bed, sleepeth after feast. (Raffel, 1963, p. 61)

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Bringing together these passages allows an instructor to compare and contrast 2Pac's death premonitions with Beowulf's epic battle eulogy (Hill & Petchauer, 2014).

The fact that 2Pac's lyrics can be harnessed and used within the framework of a classroom environment supports the idea and notion that learning is reciprocal and both a traditional and modern fabric of the past. Instructionally relating and connecting 2Pac lyrics to Old English, Medieval literature, and ideas is intriguing enough to make supposedly challenged students relate to hip-hop machismo.

A hip-hop curriculum also provides teachers with the opportunity to utilize visual stimuli, which further promotes students' engagement with instructional lessons. Some teachers within urban school environments have been using hip-hop videos as "instructional hooks" to empower students' connection to their educational lessons (Smith, Jackson, Kitwana, & Pollard III, 2012). For instance, students in a class on world history can refer to Lil Wayne's "God Bless Amerika" video to discuss how war and natural disasters are the leading factors causing refugee problems (Crawford, 2014). Teachers can convey to students that people with minimal disposable resources are more deeply impacted by global tragedies.

To more effectively explain the instructional perspective, educators can display hip-hop video imagery of New Orleans' Lower Ninth Ward conditions in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Using Lil Wayne's "God Bless Amerika" video would allow students to identify and explain the way poor African American Katrina victims were treated like refugees by their government similar to war refugees from Somalia or Serbia. The only difference is that Katrina victims encountered a disastrous flood from several levees collapsing, while civil war forced Somalian and Serbian people into destitute conditions.

When Lil Wayne (2013) said, "God bless Amerika, This so godless Amerika, I heard tomorrow ain't promised today, And I'm smoking on them flowers, catch the bouquet," while children in the video appear poor and hungry coming from deplorable housing conditions with an American flag draped as their landscape background, it communicates the notion that nobody cares about their suffering. When Lil Wayne raps that "Everybody wanna tell me what I need," and the condition hardly improves, it forces people to either "live by the sword and die by the sword" or better yet smoke "weed" to mentally escape their living hell (Lil Wayne, 2013; Smith et al., 2012).

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Students residing in many poor urban communities completely identify and relate to this video's message and as a result emphatically comprehend the lesson objective. Similar to Lil Wayne, students discover the reality that Lower Ninth Ward residents share with Somalian and Serbian refugees. Furthermore, students can visually see how people in the Lower Ninth Ward have a second-class citizenship status parallel to poor people living in a third-world country. Recall the day when the levees broke, leaving poor African Americans extremely vulnerable, and media outlets referred to these individuals as refugees (Horne, 2006). The hip-hop video lesson articulates for students their own experiences and challenges living within disadvantaged African American neighborhoods. A teacher's instruction becomes transformative when students are able to connect or relate an excitable "hip" video's imagery to lessons about world poverty and global disasters. This not only empowered students' voice and "buy in" to learn about global causes and effects defining a refugee but also provided a visual window of inescapable opportunity to synthesize the teacher's instructional motive or intent.

Literacy Skills

The effective use of a hip-hop pedagogy builds upon students' vocabulary pedigree and literary skills. Some curriculums are now applying hip-hop lyrics to translate literary poetic devices such as allusion, alliteration, kenning, or metaphors to advance students' comprehension of British English. When Romeo said to Juliet, "From forth the fatal loins of these two foes/A pair of star-crossed lovers take their life/ Whose misadventure piteous overthrows/Doth with their death bury their parents," it applied the poetic device of allusion comparable with Lupe's vernacular expression that "Yeah, I am back up on the airwaves/Feeling like a Soldier and I ain't talking where the Bears play/Flair, look how I Fred Astaire down the staircases/It's finna be a hair-raising tortoise **[p. 411 ↓]** versus hare race" (Lupe Fiasco, 2006; Shakespeare, 2014, p. 32). Many educators are applying hip-hop to teach poetry and classic literary works to engage students' focus toward such lessons.

Hip-hop colloquial expressions or words have also been used to advance the literary culture of the United States (Emdin, 2010). It is ironic to find what was once thought of as "Black slang" is now an acceptable contemporary vernacular. Words like *flex*, *buggin*, *dope*, or *homie* are now exercised as everyday linguistic terminology to personify

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an object or express people's emotions or attitude about something. Essentially the hip-hop art form has helped many Americans discover their cultural linguistic self. When language is expressed as an art form, it better connects students to lessons and enriches a curriculum's objective (Delpit, 2006).

There are multiple ways hip-hop can communicate language by shifting different terms to translate a message. If applied to instruction, students could translate and decode traditional English into their own cultural message. In other words, "rap" vocabulary is used to create a new reality with the way students accurately understand and describe their comprehension of classroom lessons. Lisa Delpit (2006) and Theresa Perry, Claude Steele, and Asa Hilliard III (2003) discussed how cultural language should advance the educational experience to provide students with a better opportunity to express their understanding and synthesis of subject matter. This model actually facilitates higher learning experiences within the classroom because students speak and interpret from a "voice" of instructional understanding. It increases students' involvement and participation within the learning arena. Some critics suggest teaching using African American vernacular, sometimes referred to as Ebonics, simply reinforces nonstandard English. However, a CVD pedagogy stresses the importance of educators allowing students to utilize their cultural dialect in academic spaces to effectively communicate their ideas and understanding of instructional lessons. To do so inevitably grants minority learners with more access to engage academia (Perry & Delpit, 1998). Similarly some scholars believe this language conceptual model incapacitates students' ability to translate the standard language system into academic and professional success. Such an argument has been widely addressed for a number of years. Hip-hop linguistics critically contradicts this argument supporting the viewpoint that students learn better when they speak and translate conversations from their own realities. When students are translating and decoding instruction from their lens, Delpit (2006) referred to this type of learning as "biculturality." This means students have a language system of their own that requires valuing and adherence if learning is to actually take place within a standard classroom setting. When this occurs, a classroom becomes authenticated and real because students are intellectually qualifying academic concepts based upon their linguistic understanding (Perry et al., 2003).

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Restoring a Connection

A hip-hop CVD model allows students' inner human and cultural experiences to materialize within the physical space of a classroom. When students are provided opportunities of self-expression, they are educated to learn how classroom instruction connects with their own lived experiences and environments. Lawrence Krisna Parker, known by the stage name KRS-One, expounded on this saying:

> This of course, is in no way a degradation of math and science. But if math and science are not put in their proper intellectual places, real *HipHop* as well as the nature of one's true reality will be impossible to comprehend. (2013, p. 17)

Math and science, according to KRS-One, as authentic "sciences," should be used to help students perceive the importance of learning these brilliant pedagogies rather than believing they are somehow obscure or disconnected experiences. Math is used every day when, for example, spending money or thinking about how to access power, whereas science assists in cooking or nourishing one's body. In other words, both of these fields have to be applied and shown to students to demonstrate how they contribute to their intellectual wherewithal.

When students perceive learning as a part of their reality, it causes them to want to learn more. The problem, from Paulo Freire's (2000) belief, is that far too many subject areas are taught as an abstract concept instead of an applied approach. History, science, math, and English are viewed as separated fragments of each other rather than interdisciplinary units of the same field. All of these subjects should be utilized and connected to students' educational **[p. 412 ↓]** experiences by way of project-based learning opportunities. Whatever learners are currently studying in history should already apply to what they are learning in English, science, and math. Freire asserts this is a type of classical education where fields of study are seen as organic experiences versus an abstract study.

KRS-One addresses this issue when he teaches about the origins of hip-hop as a cultural movement. As it relates to history, KRS-One discusses Afrika Bambaataa's

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architecture and engineering of a cultural movement that blended math, science, and English. From the standpoint of cleaning up or redeeming parts of New York's urban culture that had been abandoned by mainstream society, Bambaataa used music as a source to teach people how they could transform their lives. Embedded within this musical narrative is a powerful lesson of how people used graffiti or “tagging” to beautify abandoned, burnt-out apartment complexes scattered throughout the Bronx and Brooklyn that were deliberately destroyed by arsonist landlords to collect insurance claims. To exorcise illicit and criminal activities normalized within these abandoned buildings' interiors and courtyards, Bambaataa produced and performed parties (Parker, 2013). As an English lesson, poetry with its multiple literary devices educated and entertained people about their cultural history and the principles of community empowerment. Rent parties emerged to support families in need. Aesthetic graffiti became a necessary tool to manifest innate natural talents to reclaim forgotten spaces. Disc jockeys like Kool DJ Herc and Grand Master Flash engineered their record turntables applying science and math, using thrown-away mechanical parts from industrial lots and janitorial garbage to develop the “cut and scratch” dual technique of playing music. Hip-hop, to become a success, applied an interdisciplinary methodology to proactively engage its clientele and community. It changed the way today's youth express their attitudes and the way they behave in the classroom and in their neighborhoods. Teachers should apply an interdisciplinary, project-based, CVD learning construct as an instructional strategy to improve the engagement of minority learners. Without orchestrating a direct, interdisciplinary response to students, they will continue to remain disengaged, disconnected, and unexpressed within many standard classroom settings.

Transformative Learning, Modes of Expression, and Forms of Inquiry

2Pac, Lil Wayne, and Lil' Kim return to class the next day excited from experiencing yesterday's hip-hop CVD lesson. Not only were they involved in developing an interdisciplinary project-based assignment between their English and social studies classes reading Erik Larson's *Devil in the White City* (2004), but also they seemed

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highly engaged with the art-integrated lessons utilized within the classroom. 2Pac is examining the murder mystery of H. H. Holmes's crimes as depicted in the book and developing poetic letters expressing the killer's intentions for committing mass murder. Lil Wayne is reading a section of the book with his peers about the skeletal wages and hazardous work assignments immigrant employees received to build and design the "White City" for the Chicago World's Fair in 1893. Lil Wayne's task is to write diary entries of an immigrant who worked on the White City. The teachers have agreed he can use poetry or any other creative writing styles to complete the diary, including Internet blogs, Facebook posts, memoirs, or a television skit. Lil' Kim is studying several cases of missing women the serial killer is suspected of murdering. Her assignment is to role-play a woman who escaped Holmes's death traps and report on the mysteries of his dwellings and personality. Again, the teacher is allowing her to apply creative writing concepts such as notebook, dialogue, protagonist, point of view, and plot to express her comprehension and synthesis of Holmes and the female victims he murdered. Other students are applying science to determine the chemical Holmes used to incapacitate his victims, or utilizing geometry to erect a building onto the campus of the White City. These kinds of popular cultural milieu, and the artistry involved, inevitably are modes of expression. Viewed in this way, the hip-hop artist 2Pac and other artists can be seen as educational scholars, theorists, or researchers.

The ability of students to experience voice in a classroom radically materializes desired learning outcomes, which represents the true intent of transformative education (Ladson-Billings, 2005). 2Pac, the stage name for Tupac Shakur, at one point in his life attended a performing arts school in Baltimore where he studied the works of Shakespeare, Machiavelli, Nietzsche, and Hegel. These literary **[p. 413 ↓]** texts and the associated philosophies had a deep impact on 2Pac's viewpoints and beliefs (Rose, 2013). At the Baltimore Performing Art Academy, 2Pac participated in plays, designed visual sets, applied poetic devices, and so forth, to express his understanding of academic lessons. 2Pac discusses the impact this sort of curriculum had upon him when he says:

> There should be a class on drugs. There should be a class on sex education, a real sex education class. Not just pictures and diaphragms and un-logical terms and things like that. … There should be a class on scams, there should be a class on religious cults, there should be

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> a class on police brutality, there should be a class on apartheid, there should be on racism in America, there should be a class on why people are hungry, but there are not, there's class on gym, you know, physical education. … Actually they should be teaching you English, and then teaching you how to understand double-talk, politicians' double-talk.
> (Tupac Shakur, 2013)

For 2Pac, education is not or should never be just about abstract concepts inherited within subject matters. Rather it should address the needs of a community while teaching students how to translate assignments into their perspectives. When students become investigative clinicians and participants of their own learning, they transform into intellectual scholar warriors (Rose, 2013). A hip-hop CVD allows students to speak from their own voices, vernacular, and understanding without any racial or subjective judgments cast toward them. It beckons them to seek out meaning, understanding, and clarity, which adds value to their lived experiences. More important, it builds efficacy and cultural capital in learners and helps them to find real meaning and purpose of education.

Questions remain: Do 2Pac and other hip-hop artists' lyrics and intellectual philosophy actually reflect a modality of inquiry? If 2Pac can be considered a philosopher, educator, and theorizer, can the representations in his music not be a form of inquiry in and of themselves? While one could and should turn to the arts-based research of Tom Barone and Elliot Eisner (2012), or many other forms of qualitative inquiry (e.g., Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Denzin, Lincoln, & Tuhiwai Smith, 2008) to capture key features of popular cultural milieu in its many forms, or hip-hop pedagogy in particular, it is possible to argue that hip-hop artists are theorists and researchers in popular culture who have, in fact, developed their own forms of theory and inquiry that are true to the medium they create. Whereas the forms of expression are incorporated into the work of the hip-hop artists, many scholars study the popular cultural milieu in various ways. For instance, educational researchers use anthropological forms of ethnographic methods to study hip-hop curriculum and pedagogy (Hill, 2009). Greg Dimitriadis (2001/2009) conducted an ethnography of hip-hop culture at a community center. Similarly, both David Stovall (2006) and Marc Lamont Hill (2009) used ethnographic methods to study critical hip-hop pedagogy in high school settings. Ernest Morell and Jeffrey Duncan-Andrade (2002) narratively documented their work engaging youth through hip-hop to teach traditional

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and canonical texts. Other scholars such as Carol Lee (2007) have guided the study of hip-hop and the popular cultural milieu through what Lee has called cultural modeling.

The whole issue of responding to popular cultural milieu in curriculum would require book-length treatment. In fact, this has been done in another handbook (Sandlin, Schultz, & Burdick, 2010). In this chapter, we illustrate how hip-hop, one highly influential dimension of the popular cultural milieu, can become culturally relevant by employing a *CVD pedagogy*. In doing so we acknowledge that this pedagogy is derived from *culturally responsive teaching* as characterized by Gloria Ladson-Billings (1994), who has continued to develop this approach through hip-hop as elaborated on her websites at the University of Wisconsin. A central point of this chapter is that culturally relevant and highly educative dimensions of popular culture can be the basis for curriculum in a diverse array of subjects and educational contexts. It can engage student experiences and invigorate their aspirations to excel.

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