

Doing My Thing, My Way, For My Purpose:  
Hip Hop and African American Student Engagement

*Abstract*

Using case study methodology, an Afrocentric framework applied Africana Critical Theory and Critical Hip-Hop Pedagogy to analyze engagement and Black students' voice that stated hip hop is at the core of their identity. The students used empowered spaces to develop ideas and strategies to proactively decide why and how to interact with the protocols of the classroom. The students rejected compromising their identity and the assimilationist expectations of the school. The process whereby hip-hop culture equipped and empowered the students occurs in the community of practice. The process displays the essential importance of habitus, scheme, and elaborate and restrictive codes within the community of practice. The research findings are used to suggest pedagogical strategies to transform the African American community.

*Purpose*

This qualitative case study sought to describe and interpret how African American students make use of the cultural capital of hip hop to engage or disengage in learning activities in a secondary classroom. A major goal of the project was to honor the voices of the students involved. Students, especially African American students, are too often the objects of research. Frequently, the experiences of African American students are compared to others' experiences, thus diluting their voice and marginalizing their point of view. Another goal of the research was to explicate colonial education as the strategic purpose of educating students from African American communities. Colonial education reveals that Western cultural hegemony is at the heart of public education. Colonial

education sets up the conditions of cultural incongruity and cultural mismatch with students from non-mainstream cultures.

*The Conceptual/Theoretical Framework of the Research*

Researchers have used colonial pedagogy as an effective lens to view what is going on in schools (Bell, 1994; Holleran, 2003; Kozol, 1991, 2000a, 2000b, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Macedo, 2000a, 2000b). The purpose and context of European cultural imposition has been the maintenance of colonial domination of Africans in America, on the continent of Africa, and elsewhere in the Diaspora. The expectation that successful African American students will learn and live the language and behaviors of the mainstream culture of the United States is evidence that public education maintains the traditional purpose of colonial education. That purpose is the assimilation of the colonized. Colonial education is intended to denigrate confidence and faith in indigenous traditions, thus preparing the colonized mind to acknowledge the hegemony/superiority of the colonizer. The colonial complex is supported and maintained, in part, by a colonized people who have been taught to acquiesce to the alleged rightness and imagined superiority of the colonial culture.

The research was built upon a conceptual/theoretical array. Africana Critical Theory (Rabaka, 2002, 2003, 2006), Critical Hip Hop Pedagogy (Akom, 2009), and Critical Pan-Ethnic Studies (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008) were utilized to critique cultural capital, student engagement, and cultural mismatch/cultural incongruity. Hip hop's pervasive influence on African American youth culture is a force in the student's community of practice. It is in the community of practice that cultural capital is cultivated into habitus. Habitus is the basis for the development of elaborate and restrictive codes,

and of a scheme for action in the classroom. The code equips students to identify the cultural orientation of classroom activity. If the culture of the classroom is mismatched with the student, then a scheme is employed that engages the class activity. The following two research questions were posed:

1. How do African American students make use of the cultural capital of hip hop to engage or disengage in learning activities in a secondary classroom?
2. How does an African American student community of practice describe applications of hip-hop habitus in a secondary classroom?

#### *Procedures*

Three senior class students, James, Sean, and Sharon, were observed in a core subject class at Inland High School in Spring 2009. These students also supplied data through interviews and journals. James, Sean, and Sharon stated that hip hop was at the core of their identity. Additionally, two focus group interviews were conducted. One focus group consisted of senior class students who self-identified with hip hop. The other focus group consisted of senior class students who did not self-identify with hip hop. The focus groups were a source of validation of the data obtained from the three primary subjects.

Elements of grounded theory and intertextual analysis were synthesized in the data analysis. I was seeking to uncover the process by which the student uses the cultural capital of hip hop to assign meaning to the intertextual event and a decision is made to engage in or disengage from the activity. By grounding the research in their history and experience and listening to the voices of African American students, a process whereby youth culture equips and empowers students is uncovered. The themes

and subthemes are: (a) assertiveness/agency, with subthemes of defiant-demeanor and swagger; (b) voice, with subthemes of self-empowered space and personal responsibility; and (c) essential interactions, with a subtheme of congealing praxis. The subthemes reveal key areas where the students expressed and emphasized proactive agency. These are the spaces where they did their own thing, in their own way, on their own terms. These themes and subthemes are contributions to the field of study. James, Sean, and Sharon used their empowered spaces to develop ideas and devise strategies to proactively decide for themselves why and how to interact with the protocols of the classroom. The essential importance of habitus and scheme within the community of practice is an additional contribution of this project. Identifying the process of the elaborate and restrictive code is another contribution of this research.

#### *Summation*

The interplay of the themes shows the prime importance of the community of practice and community funds of knowledge in the engagement of James, Sean, and Sharon in classroom learning activities. Further, the data show that, beyond receiving instruction, James, Sean, and Sharon were unconcerned with the expectations of their teachers and the rules of the school. Additionally, the data show three African American students who chose to employ successful, proactive academic behaviors on their own terms, for their own purposes, and in their own way.

The community of practice emerges as an important structure in the lives of James, Sean, and Sharon. Habitus and scheme are part of the cultural competencies learned in the community of practice. Each of the subthemes is a competency. Each of

the subthemes corroborates the theme. The interplay of the themes and subthemes constitute the dynamics of each student's scheme.

The data show that James, Sean, and Sharon used their hip-hop identity to impose a scheme for engaging learning activities in the classroom. The schemes were developed in a community of practice. The students used the habitus of the community of practice to employ cultural capital and cultural competencies in the development of their schemes. The schemes became a buttress against the expectations that they seek assimilation into the cultural mainstream. Instead, these students asserted their own identity upon their circumstance in the classroom. For each student, their scheme was an effective way to engage learning activities. James, Sean, and Sharon graduated from Inland High School and attend college.

*Habitus, Cultural and Social Capital, and the Community of Practice*

This project reveals that the community of practice is an empowered space, often formulated and maintained outside of the classroom, where African American youth cultural competencies are developed. For James, Sean, and Sharon, hip hop is a key context within which the community of practice cultivates habitus and develops competency. The scheme for school success developed by the students relies on essential cultural competencies. Bourdieu (1990) argues that social position determines learning and practicing of appropriate competencies. Hence, the competencies learned through the context of hip hop in an urban youth community of practice may clash with the mainstream middle class expectations of competency in a public school classroom.

James, Sean, and Sharon share an ability to recognize the context of the classroom. Through use of a restricted hip-hop code, they could recognize and realize the competency of their teachers and classmates. James, Sean, and Sharon saw a level of hip-hop incompetency in his/her teacher. They asserted a resistive agency when they choose to ignore their teacher's expectations of them and do it their own way. For these three students who self-identify with hip hop, the expression of agency was precipitated by the cultural incongruence of the classroom. Further, in the end each student developed a different but successful scheme that was developed out of his/her hip-hop habitus. The Critical Hip Hop Pedagogue is challenged to facilitate this agency into transformational resistance. This challenge elevates the empirical importance of the community of practice.

*The Voices of the Students Connected within the Greater African American Community  
and Contrasted with Colonial Education*

One of the goals of the research was to hear the voices of these African American students. Voice was grounded in the historic location of their diasporic history. They are the subjects, not the object, of this research project. As such, the narratives of three clear-thinking proactive students emerge. Their perspectives are a new lens from which to view and understand the dynamics of the classroom and the educational system. Another goal of the research was to clarify and provide a corrective to the purpose of educating African Americans. The purpose is assimilation into the cultural and commercial mainstream. This pedagogical strategy is the extension of the historic

practice of colonial education. At the heart of colonial education is Western cultural and political hegemony.

The desire of James, Sean, and Sharon to express a cultural point of view rooted in their historic African and African American heritage created a circumstance of cultural incongruence. They self-identify and embrace hip-hop culture out of which their habitus and scheme developed. In public schools it becomes a bulwark to the oppressive structures and repressive expectations of colonial education. When the narrative focus is broadened and the experiences of James, Sean, Sharon, and the focus groups are viewed holistically, key aspects of an African American community are at work. The evidence of the community of practice shows that education is a community cultural process that begins outside of the school. By imposing a Eurocentered culture, the public school skews that community process. The expressions of African American students who identify with hip hop resist this imposition. Fundamentally, this is what is at work in their public school experience. Upon deeper examination the legitimate and honorable reconstruction of a historically disparaged community is at issue here.

Students who seek to express the voice and assert the agency of African American youth culture may disengage from classroom learning activities. The data suggest that colonial education contributes to a sense of repression and alienation from the school. James, Sean, and Sharon want social and economic success but not assimilation. They want to express their own honorable and productive self-image. James, Sean, and Sharon acquired their cultural and social capital and learned their essential hip-hop habitus in the community, in their family, and in their community of practice among their peers. They

reject the hegemony of colonial education. A new model of education utilizing an empowering pedagogy is needed.

The insights of the students are the substance of the development of critical praxis. Their actions, uncovered in this research project, reveal the community of practice, the habitus developed within it, and funds of knowledge as sites for pedagogical interventions. These interventions can scaffold between African American youth culture and classroom learning activities by facilitating and enhancing engagement. Such pedagogy is transformative. It changes the relationship between the school and the community it serves. Instead of a colonial outpost, the school acts as a hub where ethnic mores are appreciated and validated, and commercial skills are learned.

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