6. Developing Civic Empowerment for Black Youth Through Student-Driven Hip-Hop Music Production in the Classroom

JABARI M. EVANS

Abstract: In this study, I draw on ethnographic data (interviews and focus groups) to explore an in-school Hip-Hop Music Education pilot program within an urban school district to explore the link between civic development and hip-hop artistic practice. Results of this study indicate that the program participants thought the program provided them with culturally responsive pedagogy that also acted as an agent in developing civic imagination within the emerging media makers. Three primary themes that emerged within the data were: (a) supporting student enthusiasm for hip-hop, (b) promoting hip-hop song making as an agent for social change, and (c) legitimizing the hip-hop ethos as useful to a meaningful career pathway. These findings suggest that participants engaged in connected learning through hip-hop in ways that indicate an ability to leverage their music-oriented identity projects for their civic engagement into adulthood. These findings also suggest that adolescence is an important time frame in which children are developing hip-hop social identities, but in ways that are tied to realistic planning and skill development. To conclude, I suggest that urban schools should use Hip-Hop Music Education as a resource for helping students of color to connect lived experiences to their academic lives and future career aspirations.

Introduction and Background

As increasing numbers of young people seek to master the use of media tools to express themselves, explore their identities, and connect with peers, urban school districts have sought to partner with community youth programs to encourage young media makers to exercise active citizenship through projects that allow youth to talk about issues that affect them personally (Clark & Marchi, 2017). Prior studies have suggested that these programs can bolster young people's enthusiasm for using digital media in the service of civic engagement (Barron, Gomez, Pinkard, & Martin, 2014; Larson et al., 2013). In doing so, this research has often depicted 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 audiences outside their community and to ensure their personal, professional, and academic achievement potential. (e.g., Rheingold, 2008). Though research on 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 youth media programs can support an expanded and more contemporary view of the learning goals necessary for successful citizenship in the 21st century. Among these new goals are learning and innovation skills; information, media, and technology skills; life and career skills; and civic content around core subjects (Barron et al., 2014; Ito et al., 2013; Watkins & Cho, 2018).

Further complicating issues of learning equity is that racial and ethnic groups differentially access and experience schools, which can greatly affect their performance and life trajectories (Rowan, 1995). Questions regarding why learning equity gaps between racial and ethnic groups exist, particularly among African Americans, have largely dominated conversations about race in media literacy education (Rideout, Scott, & Clark, 2016; Watkins & Cho, 2018). In lessening this disparity, researchers have theorized that hip-hop music is a vital signal carrier for promoting innovative learning among young people of color (Evans, 2019; Peterson, 2013; Seidel, 2011; Watkins, 2019). Hip-hop artistic practices have been identified by researchers as an innovative way to teach technological skills and promote individual creativity

(Seidel, 2011). This rationale follows that hip-hop–based music education (HHBE) could not only involve learning to make hip-hop music itself, but also to the ways that young people learn to communicate with one another, express themselves, and establish their identities as well as generate knowledge through hip-hop culture (Peterson, 2013). Despite interest expressed in these earlier studies, there is a dearth of research about how HHBE programs can impact civic development.

This report is focused on civic empowerment as a barrier and a lever for expanding career opportunity, and thus narrows in on evaluating an HHBE program on its elements that influence civic development. Thus, the aim of this study is to explore how adversities for civic development among Black youth are confronted within HHBE experiences. Using Chicago's Foundations of Music Rap Songwriting and Production (SWP) program as a case study, the purpose of this paper is to examine an HHBE program as an exemplar to explore the ways in which enthusiasm for hip-hop can be used as an asset to shape civic development in African American youth (particularly those with skills related to digital media literacy and interest in professional media production). Additionally, the purpose of this study is to explore how those emerging identities might influence their attitudes and actionable efforts toward tangible academic and professional success.

Ultimately, in this paper I argue that the development of one's hip-hop "voice" (a unique style of personal expression that distinguishes one's communications from those of others) is called upon in the SWP program to help connect participants' energetic involvement in hip-hop's community of practice with cultivating civic empowerment that can carry them as adult citizens. I develop this argument in six parts. First, I analyze 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 engagement to the academic achievement of low-income youth of color as well as pathways to 21st-century media careers. 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.

Data, Methodology, and Analysis

Data for this study were gathered using three methods—focus groups (with students and teaching artists), in-depth interviews (with 11 students—7 males and 4 females), and participant observation conducted in the spring of 2019. The research was carried out using the case study method (Stake, 2005; Yin, 2009), which takes up a particular case to understand phenomena. In this case, the SWP program is used to explore the phenomena of urban young people's general experiences of HHBE in their self-efficacy and occupational identity.

I was the only researcher conducting fieldwork at the elementary schools. As I conducted fieldwork at the SWP program, I was also communicating with a number of school staff members in an attempt to gain better access to the school environment for a holistic view of the sites' context. 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 names of the schools so as not to give identifying information regarding the participants.

The SWP Classroom Studio, Defined

The SWP program was designed to produce connected learning through academic engagement with digital media production, sociopolitical awareness, and civic imagination through rap songwriting. The courses I attended met for 60 minutes two times a week for 10 consecutive weeks with a teaching artist named KP. While observing the way in which KP structured his 60-minute classes, I noticed that he would generally use the first half of the class (25 minutes; see Evans [2019] for an overview of the program lesson themes) to lead students through a five-minute lecture and 20 minutes of discussion in response to the lecture, and he would use the second half of the class (25 minutes) to provide students a structured free time to work on their individual projects. For the final 10 minutes of the class, 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 their everyday lives. 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 KP supervised their progress to completion.

It was an exploration of hip-hop composition, in which digital tools aided the processes of producing and recording of student songs. With the understanding that in previous research, hip-hop has been deemed questionable as a central element of music education, the program directors and advisory board of the SWP program sought to approach HHBE as a way to develop media literacy and critical consciousness to address the long-existing learning-equity gap for Black youth in America. In recognizing hip-hop as the most important cultural product in the last 50 years (Mauch, MacCallum, Levy, & Leroi, 2015), the parties involved in designing the SWP program sought to use HHBE to produce interest-driven learning in the urban classroom.

Findings

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 capitalize on a vital cultural practice that is central to hip-hop culture—dialogue. During our one-on-one interview, KP explained that the most effective results in the SWP program happened when he followed up student-led discoveries with discussions and activities that promoted true reflection about those discussions. He elaborated:

> Our classroom conversations are brutally honest and there's a freedom between the students and me in choosing how to craft every detail of every song. I purposefully empower the students that normally aren't considered leaders to lead classroom discussions and I also allowed them to speak to me in the way they would outside of a school building. Hip-hop has always been about keeping it real and being authentic but 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. Still, I didn't tell them their music was negative. I simply asked them questions about why they liked that music and often challenged them to think deeper about what they produce and/or consume. This often sparked really great conversation. You saw how much they shifted their song ideas, right?

KP went on to explain to me that though the majority of the students in the SWP program were considered "bad," "at-

risk," and/or "remedial," the critical concepts that they discussed during their class sessions indicated an aptitude for learning that was more than adequate when engaged with themes respectful of their 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 five 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. I gave her the first A she ever received in her life and it was in a hip-hop class! But still, she deserved it!

Before a performance at Foundations of Music's End of the Year Celebration, 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. We were working on our mixtape and now we're doing performances in front of crowds like this. It's crazy when I think about it but now I see everything differently. I feel respected by people at school. I see why I was tweaking before. I wasn't really giving school a chance. Now, I'm like cool with [Principal] Freeney and all my teachers. I don't know if they believed in me. Shit, I ain't really believe in myself at that point! [laughs]

Though their academic records often reflected poor performance, the SWP program showcased a determination to learn and great critical thinking when lesson themes piqued their interest. In particular, SWP students engaged regularly in self-regulated learning. During the second half of the class curriculum, SWP students routinely used 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 in a community of practice. This is something that many students said made them feel empowered. During our one-on-one meeting after his focus group, Randy commented how he appreciated that independence 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 feel like I learned as much about life as I did about music and the fact that we got to perform for the whole school made me feel good. I can't really explain it but it really made me look forward to coming to school to make my own music.

Though many people in their home lives 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 this class is like … inspiring us to like … to do great things. It's like we could use music to do big things or like it doesn't have to be afterschool. We can make stuff that we like outside of school and people in school should care about it.

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. For many musicians, storytelling in music often "sustains and directs how individuals understand their past self and how they transcend that self-moving forward" (Baym, 2018, p. 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 they also critiqued the practices of law enforcement toward Black men in Chicago. On this subject, Wade stated:

> Bro, it was fun to play my music for my mom because she liked it and I worked hard on it but it just made me think about all the stuff I should do, bro. Like if I listen to my mom and dad I could be graduating, playing basketball, and headed to a community college or something.

Wade's comments are evidence that when group identities are collectively believed in, groups tend to behave collectively (e.g., Scheitle, Corcoran, & Halligan, 2018). In other words, group identity can often lead to group cohesion and the creation of a more liberating space. Many students in the SWP program spoke about feeling as though they could now excel in their schoolwork because they thought their interests were being taken seriously by some of the adults they interacted with regularly. In speaking on how the SWP experience might particularly carry on with him to adulthood, Wade explained:

> In this class, I learned that my voice can be heard as is and be meaningful. For the most part, I be quiet in classes because I'm scared that the teacher is going to correct me or someone will think I sound stupid. In here, I learned that asking questions actually makes you smarter. Like in the music business, you can't shut down a person because they don't speak all proper. All my ideas ended up being used in the songs that we made. I know now I have good ideas that could be big and I don't need to be quiet so much anymore. I want to be like a film director or something. KP said it would be good for someone like me.

The SWP participants discussed how, by providing opportunities to youth who come from communities where opportunities for access to legitimate success are few and far between, the program promoted their hip-hop identity and allowed them to have a safe space to celebrate their Blackness and express their innermost uncensored feelings about society and their place within it. At the onset, the main goal of the program was to get students comfortable with the technology and creative strategy used to make professional-level music. Unintentionally, a main outcome of the program was that many students were taught how to develop a public voice and articulate their thoughts on social and personal issues in a constructive manner. For participants of the SWP program, the experience of analyzing 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. In this sense, the program opened the possibility for students to see their work in the media as a form of media activism, in that it raised awareness of the problems inherent to the structure of the media industries. Reflecting on these issues helped students think beyond their individual experiences to consider the need to work toward structural changes in society, and it may have assisted in developing a civic imagination that students could take with them into their work within media industries.

Summary of Findings

Hip-hop is a rich and complex art form that is a major facet of Black adolescence and young adulthood. A primary goal of this paper has been to examine how this digital media ecology can possibly impact the academic achievement gap and learning outcomes of Black students. Synthesizing the evidence about how interventions can influence occupational identity is challenging because few programs explicitly measure these types of outcomes, focusing instead on academic outcomes. Rather than arguing over the influence of representations on young people's self-concept and occupational identity, this study is tracking the impact of a specific intervention, something that has rarely been done in social science research. Using an interdisciplinary case study research approach that weds communications research and learning research, I have sought to show that the SWP program's exposure to popular media-making practices can have significant and lasting impacts on the occupational identity and public voice of its participants.

In their class sessions, SWP participants talk 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 doing so, they

view their stories as an urgent need to respond to events as advocates for the communities of Chicago. Throughout their hip-hop artistic practice, the SWP songwriting process emphasized students' coming together to create narratives about who they saw themselves as within their neighborhood and hip-hop's larger community. In trusting KP, students described the music-making process in the SWP as being legitimate, not just a disingenuous attempt to engage their occupational interests in curricular design. The youth continually reflected on how much they appreciated having this opportunity, even though they were skeptical it would happen regularly, if ever again.

Previous research has shown that the "achievement gap conversation" generally reinforces ideologies that Black youth are intellectually inferior, and that narrative often undermines how Black youth are viewed by others and themselves. However, SWP participants often spoke of learning how to use hip-hop as a theory of knowledge or a philosophy of learning that was much like a religion or a literacy of freedom that would help them throughout their lives. These young people did not define themselves as youth or as Black and Brown people, but as emerging professionals and seekers of truth in marginalized spaces. They socialized with each other into their unique form of professionalism that reflects their shared values. In my eyes, they were using their class discussions, in which critical peer feedback plays a key role, to develop their occupational identity as media makers obligated to accurately represent the Black and Brown communities in which they resided.

Ultimately, by supporting educators in designing and implementing in-school hip-hop–based education programs for young people that are grounded in connected learning, the SWP program leveraged the hip-hop identities of young people to help them create and complete substantive identity projects. This form of helping youth in discovering their passions gave them a buffer from challenging life circumstances and sustains them as they continue to discover their place in the world. Technology, much like popular music, has always sparked some to succumb to a utopian vision of solutions to complex problems. However, my findings within the SWP program suggest that HHBE creates civic opportunities that build on Black youth's passions for local community issues and creates an ethos of reciprocity with youth by showing youth they are cared for, valued, and heard.

References

Barron, B., Gomez, K., Pinkard, N., & Martin, C. K. (2014). *The digital youth network: Cultivating digital media citizenship in urban communities*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

Baym, N. K. (2018). *Playing to the crowd: Musicians, audiences, and the intimate work of connection*. New York: NYU Press.

Clark, L. S., & Marchi, R. (2017). *Young people and the future of news: Social media and the rise of connective journalism*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Evans, J. M. (2019). "Deeper than rap": Cultivating racial identity and critical voices through hip-hop recording practices in the music classroom. *Journal of Media Literacy Education*, 11(3), 20–36.

Ito, M., Gutiérrez, K., Livingstone, S., Penuel, B., Rhodes, J., Salen, K., … Watkins, S. C. (2013). *Connected learning: An agenda for research and design*. Irvine, CA: Digital Media and Learning Research Hub.

Larson, K., Ito, M., Brown, E., Hawkins, M., Pinkard, N., & Sebring, P. (2013). *Safe space and shared interests: YOUmedia Chicago as a laboratory for connected learning*. Irvine, CA: Digital Media and Learning Research Hub.

Mauch, M., MacCallum, R. M., Levy, M., & Leroi, A. M. (2015). The evolution of popular music: USA 1960–2010. *Royal Society Open Science*, 2(5). https://doi.org/10.1098/rsos.150081

Peterson, J. (2013). Rewriting the remix: College composition and the educational elements of hip-hop. In M. L. Hill & E. Petchauer (Eds.), *Schooling hip-hop: Expanding hip-hop based education across the curriculum* (pp. 47–65). New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Rheingold, H. (2008). *Using participatory media and public voice to encourage civic engagement*. MacArthur Foundation Digital Media and Learning Initiative. In W. L. Bennett (Ed.), *Civic life online: Learning how digital media can engage youth* (pp. 97–118). The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Series on Digital Media and Learning. Cambridge, MA:

The MIT Press.
Rideout, V. J., Scott, K. A., & Clark, D. K. A. (2016). The digital lives of African American tweens, teens, and parents: Innovating and learning with technology [Executive summary]. Tempe, AZ: Center for Gender Equity in Science and Technology.
Rowan, B. (1995). Learning, teaching, and educational administration: Toward a research agenda. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, *31*(3), 344–354.
Scheitle, C. P., Corcoran, K. E., & Halligan, C. (2018). The rise of the nones and the changing relationships between identity, belief, and behavior. *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, *33*(3), 567–579.
Seidel, S. (2011). *Hip hop genius: Remixing high school education*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Education.
Stake, R. E. (2005). Qualitative case studies. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 443–466). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
Watkins, S. C. (2019). *Don't knock the hustle: Young creatives, tech ingenuity, and the making of a new innovation economy*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
Watkins, S. C., & Cho, A. (2018). *The digital edge: How Black and Latino youth navigate digital inequality*. New York: NYU Press.
Yin, R. K. (2009). *Case study research: Design and methods*. London, UK, and Singapore: Sage.

Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank Foundations of Music, Dr. Ellen Wartella, Dr. Nichole Pinkard, and Dr. Aymar Jean Christian for their creative assistance and conceptual insight during the initial stages of this research.