

~~Presidential Pardons~~

NOTE: Presidential Pardons is a newly added section for past and current MATE presidents. This purpose of this section is to offer new insights, innovative thought, provocative discourse and debatable commentary across the wide scope of educational issues that profoundly affect those whose lives grace our classrooms.

Setting the Priorities:

HIP-HOP REACHES 'EM, TEACHERS TEACH 'EM!

By

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The lifespan of any educational reform should never be longer than a single generation because whenever a new generation discovers itself, educators must truly reinvent the wheel and adapt to the new lifestyle. While most educators instinctively agree that change is always fluid, too many of us have to be dragged kicking and screaming instead of embracing the next reform as being just as necessary as all previous adjustments, revisions, and revolutions. And that's exactly what's happening in the current hesitation among educational leaders to warmly embrace the use of hip-hop music and popular/youth/media culture as a learning springboard to "reach" and profoundly "teach" today's 21st century youth.

Conservative reaction to change is perhaps a healthy brake to prevent us from chasing wily-nilly after every new idea that bubbles up to the surface. But, when it comes to employing hip-hop music and popular/youth/media culture that is deemed to be developmentally and morally- appropriate in our curriculums, we are long past braking and should be accelerating. Educators who have experimented with the rap beat, hip-hop lyrics, and pop cultural artifacts have experienced such success that we

now have sufficient anecdotal evidence and research-based methodologies to embrace this change. And there is also sufficient quantitative and qualitative supportive data that we can move into these arenas with comfort. One of the early entries into this field was Dr. Nichole Pinkard of the University of Michigan, author of, “Learning to Read in Culturally Responsive Computer Environments”, who developed the Rappin’ Reader computer-based learning environment in 1996. Rappin’ Reader has experienced success by having students write their own lyrics to familiar rap music.

In more general terms, the Harvard Graduate School of Education with its Project Zero research is examining the role of the arts in learning with the goal of creating learning experiences that are engaging and exciting for children. Researchers have closely examined the effectiveness of dance as a learning medium and so they can’t be that far from discovering rap as an exciting, engaging learning model. Of more recent vintage a Hip-Hop Studies Working Group at University of California, Berkley, is turning toward the hip-hop culture in academic disciplines ranging from sociology to law, ethnomusicology to history, and education to African-American Studies. In the forefront of this new generation of hip-hop scholars is Kofe-Charu Nat Turner who has taught and studied in Ghana and Japan. “Hip-hop is the primary language students bring with them to school,” says Turner. “To ignore the language and the existence of hip-hop culture altogether is a failure to provide equal education under the law.” Another member of this group, Erinn Ransom, comments: “Using hip-hop in the curriculum will help bridge the divide between the ‘academic’ and the ‘real world.’ It can ground theories that may seem to pertain only to dead European thinkers with what is happening here today.”

Frankly, our own findings from working within Native American reservation schools is more akin to Turner, Ransom and their group than to the more traditional and classical educational thinkers like James B. Conant and Howard Gardner. Children in many reservation communities are so stricken with a multitude of barriers that they are committing suicide in record numbers. We recall several conversations with principals across five reservations that declared to us, “We don’t care about ‘No Child Left Behind’ or ‘Race to the Top’ or the ‘Common Core Standards’— our kids are killing themselves!”

But like America’s other children in the urban centers and white suburbia, Native students are deeply enmeshed in hip-hop. We introduced them to hip-hop music with educational lyrics and pop cultural artifacts and they responded immediately. Teachers, administrators and several Elders on all reservations we had the privilege of serving via professional development

workshops and keynotes, were held completely spellbound as to the power and potential that hip-hop had on reaching their youth. We have introduced many K-12 children to educational hip-hop and popular culture and have watched with amazement how quickly they grasp mathematical, grammatical and science concepts previously far beyond their reach. Teachers who have utilized our strategies have reported that standardized test scores have increased 10 percent or more when they have used our “Reach ’Em”, “Teach ’Em and various other Hip-Hop focused RTI (Response to Intervention) strategies prior to formalized instruction.

Why is this so effective? Why is student achievement increasing with the immersion of youth, media and popular culture? Simplistically speaking, “Reach ’Em” strategies move students from boredom to stardom! As educators, we gain entrance into the WILD and idiosyncratic mind of the students when we realize that many define “boredom” as school. The critical distance between boredom and stardom – failure and success is our decision to “Reach ’Em” first and “Teach ’Em” second. We must remember that teachers are from Mars . . . students are from Snickers!

At conferences we present on educational hip-hop and popular culture as vibrant, pedagogical methodologies. During our childhood the educational reform of the moment did not come from Harvard or Yale but from Public Television. Millions of children sat spellbound every day with eyes and ears glued to Sesame Street. Repetition was the tool used and music was the means employed to deliver repetition. Remember, “One of these things is not like the other, one of these things is just not the same”? The success of Sesame Street in teaching preschoolers and preparing them for school was obvious – far too obvious to the curriculum leaders of that time. The keys were repetition and incorporating learning material into tunes kids loved. And isn’t this exactly the same powerful force, 50 years later, that hip-hop and rap music brings to the table? Without repetition, rap would not be rap. So, all we have to do is lay out our learning objectives, align each objective, strategy and intervention to the Common Core and other State Standards, write words that fuel those objectives, and match the words with the hip-hop beat, and we are doing something amazing!

As we measure the success of “No Child Left Behind” and other mandated federal and state reform efforts, we must not only concern ourselves with how many are left behind, but who are left behind and why. This is a question of inclusion and access – educational equity! But is it really the children who are left behind? For today’s generation those who do not embrace educational hip-hop are truly the ones left behind – not the kids. To end on a note to ponder upon, when you add “e” for education to

“hop” we are left with hope! Perhaps we should call our work “Hip HOPE”; the educational potentiality for our 21st century’s youth!