

Hip Hop Curriculum: A valuable element for today's afterschool programs

By Aya de Leon

It is 3:25 PM. Laughter and loud voices announce the arrival of the first young people to the mural painting workshop. Many of them have been in school all day, but not all of them. Some of the participants may have been cutting class, participating in the street economy, or maybe they go to the continuation school which lets out earlier. Some teens are simply the oldest functioning member of their families, the sole breadwinner or the only English speaker. They may have had to take time out of school to deal with an eviction notice, a health crisis, a relative in trouble.

These young folks are unlikely to attend traditional afterschool programs which focus on recreation and academic enhancement. On their hierarchy of needs, play and school rank low. And yet, perhaps more than any other youth, these teens need the safety, the academic still building, the enjoyment, and the support provided by afterschool programs.

For many of today's urban youth, the key to getting their participation in afterschool programming is hip hop. Hip hop is the dominant language of youth culture, and those of us who work with young people need to speak their language. This is not simply about being "current" with the latest trends or artists, but knowing about the breadth of hip hop, beyond the mainstream media images. When we as providers fail to include hip hop programming in our services, we miss opportunities to teach media literacy, critical thinking and cultural studies.

One afterschool program that does focus on hip hop is the Mandela Arts Center in West Oakland. According to Anita de Asis, the program's coordinator, "hip hop has become a huge international phenomena. To reach almost any demographic, it would make sense to include hip hop

in the programming. The biggest buyers of rap music are white suburban youth. People should keep in mind that it's a really powerful tool for education.”

James Kass, executive director of Youth Speaks in San Francisco, agrees. “Not all the kids we work with are hip hop kids, but they all respond to the styles and languages that hip hop has created.”

Hip hop has four basic elements: emceeing (spoken poetry), graffiti (visual art), deejaying (music), and dance. Many hip hop scholars also include other elements, such as fashion and entrepreneurship, as well. Hip hop can provide a safe re-framing for many dangerous youth behaviors: fights become emcee battles, graffiti becomes mural painting classes, shoplifting becomes entrepreneurship training projects.

Hip-hop may also be used to build bridges that encourage traditional academic skills such as writing, reading and math through a youth-friendly curriculum. When I taught in UC Berkeley's Early Academic Outreach Program, I developed a curriculum called “Rap as Essay.” We studied the lyrics of various rap songs to look at finding the main idea and narrative vs. expository writing. We held debates on the use of profanity. I assigned rap lyrics and/or poetry in addition to essays. This unit engaged the students because they felt connected to the material, and it was effective in teaching the writing skills they needed to develop.

Later, in a gang-prevention project at a junior high school in Oakland, I was able to get several young women to come voluntarily to tutoring after school. Due to their history of violence, the principal thought it was hopeless, but the students came consistently, reading aloud and discussing a novel that spoke to their experience. Of course, the novel came from outside of the curriculum, but the material allowed students to develop their reading and comprehension skills. The students even asked to adapt the story into a play they could perform, which we did.

Thinking outside the box

If students are not engaged by the curriculum and teaching styles during the school day, they are certainly not going to stay after school to get more of the same.

Nicole Lee is the project director of Let's Get Free, a youth leadership development project of the Ella Baker Center, located in the Bay Area. She agrees that there is a strong need for alternative programming. "We need to think about creating alternative afterschool programs that really take into account how a whole bunch of kids are turned off by the traditional school system, and create opportunities for something different. And that's the only way you're really going to serve them."

Many times the key to academic engagement of resistant youth is to bring in community members from outside the school. I spoke with Tobin Mitchell, Director of Information Services for an afterschool program collaborative in South Cook County, located in one of the poorest neighborhoods in the Chicago area. Mitchell explained that community collaboration is key. An effective method for bringing in hip hop material, is to bring in members of the hip hop community. Mitchell explains, "teachers burn out at three o'clock." And yet, classroom teachers often have first priority when applying for afterschool teaching and tutoring positions. This is often because the schools are the primary grant recipients, and teachers need the extra money. It is important to remember that these grants are not intended to supplement teacher salaries and lengthen their work days, such funding is intended to meet the needs of youth afterschool. A second shift of adults can bring fresh ideas and energy, as well as a much needed distinction between traditional school days and afterschool hours. Hip hop programming can serve to increase afterschool attendance and keep enrollment consistent,

and a youth-driven, hip-hop based curriculum provides validation for youth who identify with hip-hop culture.

Hip-hop provides a medium for outreach to a community that is traditionally under-served. Programs intended to reach junior high and high schoolers often end up serving elementary and junior high kids because programs are too rigid to allow high school youth the freedom they need. Or if they do attract high school youth, many fail to attract the youth who need the services the most.

Afterschool services for all youth doesn't just mean expanding the capacity of current programs, it also requires a diversity of programming that is available. This would also mean that some programming needs to have a greater flexibility with regard to rules and guidelines, for youth who are not able to function in highly structured environments. According to Nicole Lee of Let's Get Free, "we have some folks who have been kicked out of virtually every institution they've ever been part of, but are actually some of the strongest leaders in our organization." Let's Get Free is willing to be supportive and flexible with participants. "Of course there are limits," Nicole Lee says. "But we have to be patient with people." Many times, rules are set up to keep activities in the comfort zone of the adults running the project. As we develop program guidelines, we need to ask ourselves, do these rules reflect the norms of youth culture or adult culture? Who are these rules here to protect?

In addition, programs need to respond to the changing needs of young people in a changing society. As increasing numbers of youth are being incarcerated, there is a greater need for programming that addresses their experience. Let's Get Free focuses on issues of policing, public safety, and prison issues. Their leadership and activist programming, as well as their focus on the juvenile justice system attract and respond to young people who have been caught up in the juvenile justice system, and want to change their lives: "There is a huge need in the community for these programs. You can come here and have an analysis about what just happened to you, why it

happened to you, and try to push the community in a different direction so it doesn't happen to other young people. And that's where the social justice and the leadership development comes in."

Another reality for many young people is that they are significant or primary breadwinners for their households. For these youth and other low-income youth with few economic options, entrepreneurship opportunities need to be central in programming. "A big need for young people is access to technology," says Anita de Asis of the Mandela Arts Center. "The kids are talented. Many of them don't really need writing or dance classes. They're the ones creating the dances you see on MTV, creating the rhythm and rhyme. They need access to technology. When we started to provide audio and video recording in our programs, our numbers doubled."

Not only is there a need for programming that addresses specific populations within high school age youth, there is a need for more focus on high school age youth, in general. According to James Kass of Youth Speaks, there is an "incredible imbalance" in afterschool resources in favor of elementary school kids. While he favors maintaining resources for younger kids, "there needs to be more investment in high school age kids; don't give up on them....We can serve elementary school age kids by having high school youth to do workshops with them." In this way both groups can be served, simultaneously.

To truly make services youth-friendly and hip hop friendly would be challenging for many programs. Although there is a push for community involvement, there is a simultaneous perceived resistance to any fundamental change in the classroom-based culture of schools. Teachers expect a certain level of order and obedience. Hip hop culture, with its emphasis on personal expression and noisy, high-energy interaction, requires a different level of chaos-tolerance on the part of the adults in charge. According to Tobin Mitchell of South Cook County, "An ideal program would be 50% school

staff and 50% people from outside community agencies, new blood....If we could have community agencies come in and provide services at the schools, the kids would be better off.”

Sometimes schools and other institutions want to collaborate only as far as is required to secure funds. Tobin Mitchell expresses her hope that “when we look for community partnerships, we are willing to take the suggestions and support from the community without pre-conceived notions of what their participation would look like.”

Some hip hop-friendly youth arts organizations have had negative experiences in collaborations. According to James Kass of Youth Speaks, some times larger, traditional agencies take advantage of their position. “They all of a sudden see hip hop is hot, and they bring us in as a tiny portion of what they do. They don’t really honor our work, but they can tell their funders they did something hip hop, so we feel exploited. As somebody who writes grant proposals, I know funders want to see that organizations are collaborating. But when it comes to collaborations, it’s gotta be both groups benefiting mutually.”

As hip hop-friendly organizations come to the table as equal partners with traditional organizations, there is great potential for innovative, effective programming, as well as potential for challenges. One challenge has to do with language and freedom of expression. Traditional organizations use rules and codes to put a stop to inappropriate or offensive language. Youth development programs tend to take a different approach. According to James Kass of Youth Speaks, their program doesn’t favor censorship. Instead, he says, “we’re gonna create a framework where you [the young person] can thrive, a safe space. And then we’re gonna put you in front of a thousand people, and you’ve gotta take responsibility for what you say in that space. And if you say something whack [inappropriate or offensive] you’re peers will check you.”

Anita de Asis of Mandela Arts Center also rejects censorship. “If we’re really here to serve young people and work with them, then we need to meet them where they’re at.” When young people express sentiments that many would consider inappropriate or offensive, she says, “it’s good that they want to talk about that stuff, when they’re open enough to say what they’re not supposed to say in school, because then we can start dealing with the problem. If we start censoring young people, then we’re not gonna ever help transform them.”

Traditional and school-based programs would do well to investigate hip hop and community-based programs, to find out what’s working, and to develop true partnerships with community projects to bring in and serve the kids who need it most. It might be a stretch for everyone, but, as Tobin Mitchell says, “we need to keep looking at what’s good for the kids.”

Suggestions on how to bring more hip hop curriculum into afterschool programs:

1. Hire staff who are themselves hip hop artists or part of the hip hop community. Hip hop is over 20 years old, so many hip hop listeners are in their 20s and 30s, providing the potential to bridge generations between youth workers and the youth themselves.
2. Bring in guest artists who are hip hop performers from the community. Seek out rap artists with a positive message, and, if your program requires it, profanity-free lyrics.
3. Sponsor rap contests. Think through rules about content and profanity and articulate them clearly, with rewards for positive messages.
4. Organized structured debates about profanity and freedom of expression in rap music.
5. Play positive hip hop music during afterschool hours.

6. Bring in artists to help students design and paint a mural on a wall or on a large piece of canvas that can be hung on the wall.
7. Seek out hip hop/academic enhancement curriculum materials.
8. Reading: Study the biographies of hip hop artists that interest the youth.
9. Math: Learn about the recording industry; calculate income and profit based on percentages of records sold and the amount that goes to the artist. This will also increase economic literacy and encourage entrepreneurship.
10. History: Study the cultural history of hip hop, as well as its connection to African-American and Latino history.
11. Writing: Have students write and perform rap lyrics.

Aya de Leon is a Black/Puerto Rican artist, writer, trainer, and consultant in the Oakland Bay Area with 19 years of experience working with youth. A graduate of Harvard College, she taught for Stanford University, UC Berkeley, the University of Creation Spirituality/Naropa Institute in Oakland, and Roxbury Community College in Boston. She has toured throughout the US, and has been published in various national journals and anthologies, including Essence magazine.