

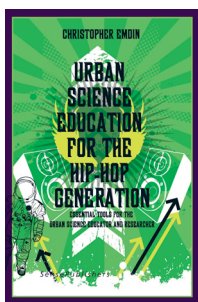
It's More Than Just Music: A Review of *Urban Science Education for the Hip-Hop Generation*

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I HAVE FOND MEMORIES of my childhood years in the South Bronx during the 1970s and '80s. Bodegas. Piraguas. Cuchifritos. Stickball. Salsa. Familia. I was immersed in the sights, sounds, and smells of my Nuyorican¹ culture. The streets were comfortable to me. Although drugs, alcohol, and gangs were daily realities, I knew how to navigate the complexities of city life with ease and confidence. School, on the other hand, was a different story.

Straight rows. Uniforms. Cafeteria food. Duck-Duck-Goose. Aerosmith. English only. Some of us learned to navigate this foreign terrain. We had teachers who met us halfway and made us feel welcome, appreciated, and accepted. Others did not fare so well. They felt bad about school, never feeling part of the culture. School was something they had to do. It made them feel deficient, and they couldn't wait until each day was over. Those who stuck it out made it to high school; some dropped out before eighth grade. For the dropouts, the streets taught them more than any science teacher ever could. Christopher Emdin's book, *Urban Science Education for the Hip-Hop Generation* (Sense Publishers, 2010, 142 pp.), provides a fascinating look at some of the reasons for the disconnect between science educators and urban youths that goes beyond other works focused on urban youths. Building on some of his prior research (Emdin, 2007, 2008, 2009), this work employs multidisciplinary and experiential discourses to engage the reader in the complexities of urban youths and urban culture.

As stated by Maxine Greene in the foreword, Emdin's work is "rooted in considering and valuing students' experiences" (p. ix). Emdin's examination of hip-hop culture goes beyond what most books on multicultural education usually do because those "will not necessarily provide the deeper insights into student culture that teachers need to succeed" (McAllister & Irvine as cited in Emdin, 2011, p. xiii). Emdin's central thesis is that effective urban education requires "deep understanding of subject matter and a profound understanding of the cultural backgrounds of students of color" (p. xii). Rather than provide guidelines and scripts, Emdin engages the



reader in a fascinating journey that traces the history of hip-hop in inner cities, the roles and rituals in hip-hop culture, and the importance of understanding the power that students wield in the science classroom. What emerges is a powerful argument for administrators to be open-minded and willing to spend more time listening to what students say (and do not say) and consider what that means for teachers (and researchers) in urban schools.

The first three chapters provide an overview of the roots of hip-hop, which can be traced back to West

African traditional music. Emdin argues that hip-hop is a form of expression for oppressed people and "urban youth share their experience with those who have a similar plight" (p. 1). By providing numerous examples from music, history, cultural sociology, ethnic studies, and his own personal experiences, Emdin guides readers to a place where they are ready to explore how teachers and researchers can discover "teaching a new way, unmasking the potential of the hip-hop generation, and finally connecting urban youth to school and science can begin" (p. 26).

The book's next section is an eloquent and nuanced examination of the complexities of urban school culture and the dynamics between teachers and students. Emdin does not point a finger at teachers for their lack of knowledge or understanding of students. Nor does he blame students for not trying or, worse yet, not being adequately prepared. Emdin is not interested in such positions; rather, he argues that hip-hop is "the culture of youth in urban settings" (p. 29) and gives students "ways of being in the world [that are] denied opportunity to become expressed in the classroom" (p. 31). In essence, hip-hop and science are different ways of examining and reacting to the world. Teachers may have more success in the classroom if they use hip-hop as a conduit to connect students with science.

I felt at ease reading about ice grills, rap battles, streetness, B-boys and B-girls, and hood passes. As an academic, teacher, and person of color, I move through myriad worlds all the time. It's a survival skill. Yet when I stand back and think of others who will read this book, I wonder how they will react. Will they

fall back to the old “How can I possibly understand all of the cultures in a classroom?” argument. “Do all ethnic minorities listen to hip-hop?” “What about students from other countries?” My advice to them is to think about the root of Emdin’s arguments. Students who are different are not deficient or dysfunctional. In fact, if one looks closely at how they navigate the world, there is a high degree of functionality that can translate to success in the classroom. What is missing for students, and should be expected by them, are spaces in school for them to be functional. Emdin argues for “cogenerative dialogues,” which help teachers to “take cues about the ways students communicate” (p. 105). By listening and learning from students, educators can enact a “reality pedagogy” (p. 99) that treats student culture as the norm. Once the rituals and practices of hip-hop become part of classroom practice, students and teachers can experience “increased science agency” (p. 110).

As Maxine Green expresses in the book’s foreword, I too hear Dewey loud and clear in *Urban Science Education for the Hip-Hop Generation*. In *The Child and the Curriculum* (1902), Dewey wrote about the three evils—lack of organic connection, lack of motivation, and loss of quality—that result when we replace the student with the subject matter as the center of gravity in the classroom. What are manifested in the urban classroom are detachment,

boredom, and confusion. Emdin adds an important perspective to the growing discourse on the role of the student and student culture in science teaching and learning. As students and teachers continue to struggle in urban schools, and educational researchers probe for answers, understanding “hip-hop and its relation to science” (p. 116) can serve to make sense out of complexity and positively transform urban education.

References

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Notes

1. *Nuyorican* refers to people of Puerto Rican ancestry who reside in the New York metropolitan area.