Rethinking Student Participation
A Model from Hip-Hop and Urban Science Education

CHRISTOPHER EMDIN
Executive Summary

Full participation in the classroom is a significant, yet under-focused upon, component of teaching and learning. Educators often inhibit students from enacting practices that support participation while they concurrently support practices that indicate peripheral or superficial involvement in what is going on in the classroom, such as raising one’s hand or spending a significant amount of time being quiet, which is often misconstrued as being attentive. The conventional focus on student participation in classrooms does not consider ways to maximize students’ potential to engage in, and be active participants in, the classroom.

In this article, participation is redefined as a process that involves new roles for both the teacher and the student. For the teacher, participation should be the enactment of practices that allow students to connect to the classroom in ways that show a genuine interest in what is happening in the classroom. For students, it is the process of connecting to the classroom in a way that allows them to equally express both their challenges in, and strengths with, the subject matter at hand in whatever way they find culturally appropriate, without inhibiting others from doing the same.

Providing a new lens for looking at participation and a new means for fostering it requires going beyond the classroom to study models of what participation should look like. Hip-hop culture is a place where the attributes of full participation are found. Although hip-hop is often misidentified as just a musical genre, it is a distinct culture that has found its way into every part of the United States. With the growth of hip-hop music, its increased consumption across the globe, and its transfer from urban settings to other parts of the country, distinct parts of hip-hop culture have also been transferred, including the way that participants in hip-hop engage in activities and its distinct communicative aspect of participation.

Many hip-hop participants view themselves as citizens of hip-hop. To be active participants in the classroom, students must hold a dual citizenship and also see themselves as citizens of the classroom. Engaging in the 3 C’s—cogenerative dialogues, coteaching, and cosmopolitanism—is a way to allow students to earn this citizenship in the classroom.
Imagine walking into a classroom filled with students who have been categorized as not able to meet academic standards because of their Individualized Educational Plans, “poor behavior,” or previous low test scores. You watch a teacher walk confidently to the front of the room and simultaneously hear the noise levels decrease. The teacher speaks, and you can almost hear a pin drop. You look around the class and see deep concentration in the students’ eyes as a lesson is delivered. The teacher asks some questions and you see hands rise quickly as each question is posed. Students are quiet, paying attention, and responding to questions. What would you think about the nature of instruction? Would you think that this was the ideal classroom? Would you be impressed by the students’ participation? And most importantly, judging by the behavior that you witnessed in that classroom, would you think that the students are on the path to being successful in school?

If you are like most teachers and administrators, particularly those who work within urban schools that have been classified as having “challenging” students, you would be pleased with what you saw. In fact, a research study that I recently conducted with teachers and administrators who observed these types of “well-behaved” classrooms revealed that they thought that the teachers were doing a wonderful job dealing with the “challenging” students. The students were quiet, the textbooks were open, and an adequate flow of questions and answers was occurring. Teachers and administrators were excited to see students whom they thought could not be successful in the classroom appear to be what one of the administrators described as “finally into what is going on.” In fact, when I asked the group of classroom observers if they thought the students that they saw in the classroom would do well on the standardized test that was going to be administered at the end of the school year, they were convinced that—based on what they saw—the students would do well. After all, the students appeared to be actively engaged, and the teacher definitely appeared to have some command over what was going on. The classrooms looked like the perfect picture of classroom partici-
pation. In fact, a recent Internet image search for classroom participation resulted in pictures that looked just like the classroom scenario described above: a teacher standing at the front of the class and a student or group of students with arms raised, looking attentive.

While the responses of classroom observers to these types of scenarios showed that they were convinced that most teachers were doing an effective job in ensuring that students were actively participating or engaging, I argue that this was not necessarily the case. In fact, a standardized test that these classes took at the end of the academic year revealed that the students in these classrooms did not fare any better than their peers in other classes who were classified as “not participating.”

In response to the incongruence between the students’ results on the standardized test and the way that they were classified as actively engaged and prepared for success, I decided to ask students what was going on in the classroom from their perspective. Were they truly engaged? Were they really participating? Was what we saw when we visited the classroom—which was considered to be full participation—a rarity?

The answer to each of these questions was a resounding no. In-depth dialogues with students reported that they were not engaged, were not truly participating, and had no true interest in what was going on in the classroom. Through more detailed dialogues with students, the process of which are detailed in a paper focused on exploring the contexts of urban classrooms (Emdin, 2008), it became apparent that students had learned quickly that being quiet in the classroom and raising their hands to answer a question was a good way to ensure that the teacher would not “bother” them. In fact, one student responded by saying, “No one really knows what he (the teacher) is doing, but we all know that if we don’t act the way he wants, he’ll start yelling and giving people detention.” Students also mentioned that the questions that the teacher was raising were always straight from the book. For example, one student mentioned, “If he tells us to turn to page 12, and the page is about atoms, and then he asks us what’s an atom, all of us will know the answer. We’re not dumb. At least we can read.”

From these conversations with students, a different perspective of what was going on in the classroom was revealed. It became apparent that the school personnel who visit classrooms and the students in the classrooms have different perspectives on participation and different goals for the classroom. Administrators want the students to pass the standardized exam, teachers want the students to be able to be quiet and pay attention, and students want the teachers to get off their backs. Unfortunately, in many instances, none of these goals support student learning or students’ interest in the academic discipline being taught. There is such a focus on accountability for quantifiable information (whether it is test data or observation of students’ behavior) that ways of teaching and learning which reflect a set of tangible, measurable, or visual outcomes without having any true purpose have become the norm. The teacher’s role is well defined, the student’s role and behavior is fixed, and the test at the end of the school year is the bottom line. This ideology includes the belief that the teacher is always right, the administrator sets all the school rules, and the student needs to be subservient in a “factory model approach to education” (Darling-Hammond, 1997, p. 17).

I argue that educators need to rethink their definition or perception of student participation in the classroom in order to cross a growing divide that exists between youth (particularly urban youth) and schools. If students are not doing well on classroom tests and do not show true evidence of learning, but their behaviors and participation in the classroom are viewed as acceptable and in some instances as models of good participation, it becomes apparent
that the way we define participation has to be expanded. While many highly-touted reform initiatives, newly-designed curricula, and transformative research conducted in education have a collective goal of having all students participate in the classroom, a major component of these new efforts to foster participation is a move toward developing active involvement in the classroom. Unfortunately, these calls for active involvement are interpreted by many educators as a call for participation as it has traditionally been viewed. Students have to raise their hands, be quiet, read from the textbook, and hopefully perform well on the test. I argue that a lot of hand-raising and even a lot of question-answering is not participation. In existing efforts, participation has been framed as an activity, process, or set of processes that are synonymous with the way that educators traditionally define or view active engagement. I argue that this approach is archaic. Furthermore, I argue that if the perception of full participation is fixed to look and sound a certain way, there is no incentive for educators to redefine it or try something new that meets the goals and needs of both educators and students.

The result of the educators’ comfort with what has been established as good practice is that the ability for youth to truly participate in the classroom is limited. This is because true markers of participation, those that are expressed in places outside of the classroom, are not accepted within the classroom. These markers of participation—deep involvement in the preparation of the experience, showing excitement through increased volume of speech and heightened use of gestures, having synchrony in movement, and having a “rhythm” of the conversation—which are key identifiers of deep involvement in activities outside of the classroom are not seen in the classroom. In many instances, these same markers of participation are often misidentified as an exhibition of poor behavior within classrooms.

For example, in a class that I observed, a student who was nodding as a teacher spoke and then began talking to a peer to reaffirm a point that was made

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by the teacher was reprimanded for talking and perceived by the teacher as a detractor to other students’ participation when he was actually deeply involved in what was going on in the classroom and could have been a motivator for his peers. Another student, who frequently raised his hand to elaborate on a point the teacher was making, was repetitively ignored because he was not talking in turn and used too many gestures (raising his hands and waving them, making excited facial expressions) in his attempt to get the teacher’s attention. These observations lead me to conclude that students are actually perceived to be “good students” if they embody practices such as being quiet and following instructions, even though these practices ultimately exclude them from full participation in the classroom and do not support their academic success.

Rethinking and Redefining Participation

In science education, educators who believe in providing students of all racial, ethnic, and socio-cultural backgrounds with equal access to science have begun to look at the engagement of all students in the classroom as a serious issue (Olitsky, 2005). Therefore, many urban science educators have started to focus on connecting students to science via non-conventional means (Elmesky & Tobin, 2005; Barton, 2001). For these researchers, urban settings have proven to be sites where much-needed change in access and exposure to science must begin. In my work, I have approached engaging students in science through similar means that can be considered unconventional. This includes the three C’s for urban science education, which involve engaging in dialogues with students (cogenerative dialogues), having students be teachers in the classroom (coteaching), and having them develop a responsibility for each others’ learning both within and outside of the classroom (cosmopolitanism). In this work, I have engaged in dialogues with students about their classroom experiences
and considered their suggestions for teaching and improving participation in the class. While I find that this push for a change in thinking about participation is necessary in urban science classrooms, similar challenges in the participation of youth face urban, suburban, and rural communities and classrooms outside of science. In each of these settings, there is a disregard for—and invalidation of—students’ understandings about teaching and learning that require a focus on new forms of full participation in classrooms.

This leads to the major understanding that must be in place before we go any further in this article: Full participation in the classroom is a significant, yet under-focused upon, component of teaching and learning that must be addressed. Educators do not practice what they preach about supporting behaviors in the classroom that foster students’ involvement. These pronouncements are supported by the fact that there is an established notion of participation that appears infallible but is rooted in the fact that too often, educators say that they want students to be engaged but do not support or engage in practices that facilitate or support true participation. The reality is that educators often inhibit students from enacting practices that support participation while they concurrently support the enactment of practices that indicate peripheral or superficial involvement in what is going on in the classroom, such as raising one’s hand or spending a significant amount of time in the classroom being quiet (which is often misconstrued as being attentive). Essentially, the current and more conventional focus on student participation in classrooms does not consider ways to maximize students’ potential to engage in, and be active participants in, the classroom.

**What is Participation?**

In this article, I redefine participation as something that goes beyond practices such as raising one’s hand in class and sharing what is in the textbook. Participation is a process that involves new roles for both the teacher and the student. For the teacher, participation should be the enactment of

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practices that allows students to connect to the classroom in ways that show a genuine interest in what is happening in the classroom. For students, it is the process of connecting to the classroom in a way that allows them to equally express both their challenges in, and strengths with, the subject matter at hand in whatever way they find culturally appropriate, without inhibiting others from doing the same. This process includes students’ involvement in aspects of the classroom that are usually left to the teacher, such as designing lessons and activities, coming up with examples to use in the class, researching best practice for teaching, and assigning roles as interpreter, artist, or even teacher of a certain topic for other students in the classroom. This approach creates new avenues for students to connect to the classroom in ways that go beyond the subject matter. I argue that when students connect both to the classroom and the process of teaching, they become connected to what is being taught and find ways to participate in the classroom that allow them to be part of the subject being taught. This process requires examining what participation looks like in places beyond the classroom where students are most engaged and interested in certain activities. I argue that if the types of information that can be derived from these types of places are supported in the classroom, and if teachers can work toward replicating the types of practices found in these out-of-school spaces, new and more genuine forms of participation might be achieved in classrooms.

Learning from New Constituencies

As alluded to earlier, providing a new lens for looking at participation and a new means for fostering it requires going beyond the behaviors that are perceived to be required for understanding the classroom text or passing a standardized test. It requires going beyond the classroom to study models of what participation should look like. On this quest for what true participation looks like, the teacher must be prepared to look beyond the classroom and

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study phenomena that may be uncomfortable for him or her. This discomfort is only a fraction of the feelings that many students experience when they are forced to enact practices that are necessary for “success” in the classroom but actually serve to further remove them from full participation within it. I suggest that the teacher must become immersed in a study of how students communicate and participate in out-of-school activities and work towards allowing students to participate in the same ways within the classroom.

From my investigations of student engagement outside of the classroom, in places that range from school lunchrooms to basketball courts, I find that true participation requires deep involvement in the preparation of a shared experience, showing excitement, having synchrony in movement and experience, and having a rhythm in the conversation where exchanges are seamless and people naturally take turns talking. These attributes of full participation are found in hip-hop culture.

**Hip-Hop’s Role in Classroom Participation**

Hip-hop, which is often misidentified as just a musical genre, is in reality a distinct culture that has found its way into each and every part of the United States. The increased consumption of hip-hop/rap music, which is arguably the chief artifact of hip-hop culture, is an indicator of the far reach of the culture and a signal to educators across the nation that the ways of knowing within hip-hop have evolved to become a key piece of American youth culture. Hip-hop is a way to capture and express the central concerns of marginalized populations in urban settings across the country. For example, hip-hop music always reflects the current social or political issues in a community. In rap music, issues that range from politics and police brutality to not being able to learn within urban classrooms are clearly articulated by rappers. This reality of hip-hop has a historical grounding in the sense that, for African Americans in the United States, “Black music has always been a primary means of cultural expression...during especially difficult social periods and traditions” (Rose, 1994, p. 184). In a nationally difficult socioeconomic period, when youth across social, racial, and ethnic boundaries are dealing with the struggles of living in an economically and socially challenging time, solace for many of them has been found in the confines of black music through hip-hop. Hip-hop’s ways of knowing have permeated the social fabric of the youth in the nation and become a part of being American. In fact, much research about the consumption of rap music shows that the most increased consumption of rap is among middle-class, suburban youth. With the growth of hip-hop music, its increased consumption across the globe, and its transfer from urban settings to other parts of the country, distinct parts of hip-hop culture have also been transferred. One of these is the way that participants in hip-hop engage in activities and the distinct communicative aspect of participation found in hip-hop.

**How Hip-Hop Connects to Education**

In urban science education, many researchers and educators have focused on the lack of engagement and communication with students. In response, teachers have began to focus on the proposals made by the National Science Resources Center (1997) and American Association for the Advancement of Science (1993), which stress the importance of communicating with students through inquiry, discourse, and debate about the processes of science that lie beyond laws, concepts, and theories. Along these lines, prominent science educators have identified communication and cooperation as one of the foci for scientific literacy (Duit & Treagust, 2003). These two points have evolved to become a key part of my recent work in urban science education and have resulted in success in science for the urban youth with whom I have worked. As a result of this success, I argue that communication and cooperation have the potential for helping teachers of any
subject matter. I argue that communication is the fundamental tool for measuring full participation. This is the case because once a person is able to clearly describe and communicate with another person about a subject, it is an indicator that the person knows something about the subject or is in a place where they can learn more about it (Wenger, 1999). I also argue that communication is a marker for gauging whether a certain performance is truly a function of full participation or if it is merely an exercise in looking or playing the part of a full participant. Students can easily answer questions that the teacher poses about a topic if they have textbooks in front of them that have the answer. In this process, the activity that is undertaken does not signify true participation or involvement in what is being taught. The student can raise his or her hand and answer the question and still not be able to engage in a dialogue about the topic being taught. On the other hand, if a student is engaged in a conversation and can communicate the ideas behind a concept through dialogue, that process is an indication that the student is fully participating in the topic, the subject, and the classroom.

In order for communication to be fully implemented in the classroom, it requires its counterpart—cooperation. Cooperation in education, and in relation to full participation, requires the students to assist in processes like planning lessons, reviewing the topics that will be taught in class, collectively deciding on assignments, and teaching the lesson. In this process, student and teacher cooperation is integral to the entire teaching and learning process and becomes the means through which true communication between students and teachers occurs about the topics being taught in class. Engaging in these cooperative practices creates opportunities for students to become active participants in the classroom in ways that go beyond the norm. These practices also give students the opportunities to gain more command over the subject matter. This process, which mimics the ways that participants in hip-hop interact on a daily basis, supports positive inter-group attributes, helps student develop positive inter-group

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behaviors, and works towards modifying teaching in ways that meet students’ needs to engage with each other as shown by their interaction with each other in hip-hop. This effort works toward increasing dialogues not only between teachers and students but also among the students. Furthermore, it allows both students and the teacher to be seen as experts in the classroom. While the teacher is the content expert, students are the experts at delivering the content in ways that relate to other students. When this process is implemented, students have new inroads into full participation.

**Classroom Participation and the Rap Cypher**

When participants in hip-hop engage in an impromptu meeting called the rap cypher, there is often a main rapper or speaker (similar to the teacher) and other members of the group (similar to students). Studying the rap cypher in settings like urban communities, suburban malls, and even Ivy League college campuses reveals a tremendous amount of information about ways to support full participation in the class. In the rap cypher, all participants are positioned in a way that allows each of them to have direct eye contact with each other and with the rapper. This structure, when implemented in the classroom, involves changing seating arrangements in ways that support eye contact and facilitate dialogue with everyone in the classroom. In addition, within the rap cypher, a structure is created that allows all participants to have equal opportunities to rap or be at the helm of the verbal exchange. The way that the cypher provides equal opportunity for all participants to be involved is a lesson for improving school participation, primarily because it delivers the message that in order to foster participation, students should be talking just as much as the teachers. In hip-hop and in the rap cypher, the understanding is that all who are engaged in the activity at hand are experts in some way because of the unique life experiences that they bring to the exchange. If this understanding is brought to the classroom, there is an underlying perception that is shared across the class that all students have something to bring to the classroom discourse. I suggest that once this understanding is in place, students are more apt to participate in the classroom in different ways.

Another fundamental way that the cypher provides information for improving participation in the classroom is through a study of the seamless ways that conversations occur within it. Instead of jarring interruptions or the need to signify that someone has something to say by interrupting an existing conversation, the participants in the cypher use subtle cues and gestures like more emphatic head nods to signify that it is the next person’s turn to rap. I argue that these attributes of the cypher, if supported in the classroom, create classrooms where full participation is more likely to occur and students are more apt to engage in discussions about the academic discipline being taught.

**What Does Full Participation Look Like? Interactions and Transactions**

The natural question that a reader would ask at this stage is this: If participation is not raising hands and asking questions, and if it is not being quiet and looking attentive, then what is it? What does it look like? My response to these questions is that through hip-hop fields like the rap cypher, true participation is everything but sitting and listening attentively. When students are actively participating, the class is a little louder than usual, students’ hands are not only raising in response to the teacher’s questions but are moving about wildly with hand gestures that match verbal descriptions and explanations, and the conversations that spur on these reactions are on the topic that the teacher brings to the classroom. In classrooms where students are actively participating, their expressions are not sober. Their faces are rich with expressions of a variety of emotions including confusion, disbelief, and excitement. However, all the emotions that are expressed lead to a set
of actions that foster some type of involvement in the classroom. Confusion very often leads to deep questions and a search for clarity, disbelief leads to active moves to either prove or disprove a point that has been made, and excitement leads to practices that display a quest for more knowledge. In essence, true participation is marked by a set of activities that are traditionally viewed as inappropriate in the classroom but that eventually lead to a hyper-engagement in the topic being discussed. For traditional educators, facilitating this type of dialogue in the classroom may require enacting certain practices that are uncomfortable, such as inviting a student to re-teach a teacher’s lesson, allowing students to have multiple types of lessons occurring at the same time, learning to differentiate between conversations that are not surrounding content and those that are geared towards students’ understanding of the content, and not reprimanding students for questioning the teacher. In order to understand the ways to enact these steps, it is necessary to study their enactment within the rap cypher.

Within the cypher, it is customary for a change of speakers to include a process where the new speaker provides a reiteration or synopsis of the main points that the previous speaker shared. In this process, the person who is speaking/rapping begins by re-teaching the last person’s rap. There is a distribution of information where participants serve as co-teachers who assist in getting the former person’s point across. This process continues until every participant in the cypher gets an opportunity to be both the main teacher who shares information and the coteacher who assists in the teaching process by re-distributing the information. In addition, the rap cypher also provides a model for having multiple types of lessons going on at the same time within the classroom. Within the cypher, there is the group of people engaged in the cypher that is working towards the larger goal of having the cypher operate well but is most focused on rapping. While these people rap, there is the group of people that is most focused on creating the beat that the rap is spoken over. These people mimic drum rhythms with their mouths (beatboxing), and although they are concerned with ensuring that the cypher functions well, they are most immediately concerned with creating the beat. In addition, there are the people who are most concerned with providing motivation to the rapper and whose function other than maintaining the cypher is to highlight accents of the delivery of the rap that indicate points that the lay listener may not pick up on. In other words, they let everyone—including the rapper—know what is successful and what is not by cheering at appropriate moments and being quiet at others and motivating others to respond to the rap being delivered. This process is one where there is not a reprimand for unsuccessful raps or lines that do not resonate with the listener. Rather, there is constant positive reinforcement for successful raps.

When comparing the traditional classroom to classrooms that reflect participation in the rap cypher and in which students are truly engaged and participating, I find that there are two general classifications. The first type of classroom is the interaction classroom and the second is the transaction classroom. Each type of classroom is named by the nature of communication within the classroom. Interactions are the lower type of participation and level of communication, while transactions operate at a higher level. In most schools, educators and administrators are satisfied with instruction that is at the interaction level. This is not to say that there is no gain in teaching and learning at the interaction phase or that the interaction phase only looks like the traditional classroom. In fact, a classroom that is at the interaction level can have students talking and gesturing. The difference is that at the interaction level, whether the voice levels are high and the students are gesturing or the students are sitting quietly and looking interested, active communication surrounding the subject matter is non-existent. At the transaction level, students are not quiet, they are using gestures, and they are also having deep conversations about the subject matter. For educators, it is necessary to be able to identify what types of communication are occurring in their
In classrooms so that they can properly assess their classroom and work towards ideal participation for students.

In addition to understanding that student participation is not facilitated by interactions, the chart above can be a tool for accurately assessing classrooms to see if they facilitate either interactions or transactions. Furthermore, through this tool, educators are more able to understand why their existing practices (that are intended to support participation) may actually support unsuccessful student practices and students’ disinterest in the classroom. When teachers realize that what they perceive as good practice is only an interaction and not a transaction, it becomes clear that they have to go beyond transferring information to the student and they have to support dialogues with and among students.

During interactions, there is a transfer of information from teacher to student simply by virtue of their both being in the same classroom. In other words, whether they are loud and using gestures or quiet and raising hands, students will learn something just by being in the class. The question is are they learning the best they can? And are they developing an interest in the topic/subject being taught? While student gestures and volume may decrease as students spend more time in a classroom in which they are reprimanded for exhibiting gestures and speaking loudly, true engagement in the classroom does not increase with the decrease in gestures and volume. In traditional “good classrooms” where students are perceived as participating, there is a whole level of teaching and learning that has not even been considered.

Whether students are mostly quiet or speaking loudly, they can still be interacting. This is why there are two levels to the interaction. In a level 1 interaction, the teacher delivers most of the science content in a monologue or speech and students are engaging in their own discussions, speaking loudly, or exhibiting behaviors that are indicative of a lack of classroom management. If the teacher is able to get the class to a point where students sit and listen quietly and possibly raise their hands to answer questions, like the class that was described in the beginning of this article, the class is only functioning at a level 2 interaction phase. When the class is at this phase, students may look attentive and may even raise their hands to answer questions. However, they are still just interacting.

### Transactions

The second type of participation and communication in the classroom is the transaction. In the transaction, the focus is not on the transfer of information from teacher to student. Rather, it is on the exchange of information between people (between students or between the student and teacher). In both levels of the transaction, students and teachers repetitively exchange information, knowledge, or time. While the exchange of information and knowledge

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interaction Level 1</th>
<th>Interaction Level 2</th>
<th>Transaction Level 1</th>
<th>Transaction Level 2</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Heightened use of gestures</td>
<td>Diminished gestures</td>
<td>Heightened use of gestures</td>
<td>Heightened use of gestures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High volume</td>
<td>Quieter classroom</td>
<td>High volume</td>
<td>Leveled volume</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No focus on content matter</td>
<td>Some focus on science</td>
<td>Some focus on science</td>
<td>Heightened focus on science</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exchanges with peers</td>
<td>Little to no exchange with peers</td>
<td>Attempts to exchange with peers</td>
<td>Full exchange with peers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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**Figure 1** shows the levels of transactions and interactions in the classroom and the attributes of students in the classroom at each stage.
are easy to grasp, the exchange of time is more abstract and more directly related to hip-hop. It is based on the value placed on time by those from socioeconomically deprived backgrounds because of the constant need to earn a living. For participants in hip-hop, there is a belief in the mutual exchange of time rooted in the principle that time for leisure or empty conversation that does not directly affect the community is time stolen from other opportunities to engage or make a living. Therefore, the initiator of a dialogue must acknowledge that a conversation with a peer that one person initiates is taking time from the group of hip-hop participants, and that time has to be repaid.

Therefore, if the teacher initiates a dialogue with a student or the class that is unrelated to their experiences or what they see as a benefit, it is necessary for the teacher to acknowledge that the time that has been taken from students will be repaid by allowing students to determine what they see fit to do with the same amount of time. When this process occurs in the classroom, teachers and students begin to build a mutual respect for each other and the exchange of time becomes a norm that ends up being a natural set of exchanges surrounding the information that the teacher brings to the classroom. With these exchanges, similar to the exchanges of information and knowledge, each person retains the information he or she has and also gains what the other offers. When transactions are enacted, heightened use of gestures and high levels of noise occur in the class. In fact, it is very easy to mistake the classroom where interactions are occurring with one where level 1 transactions are occurring. The chief difference between the two types of classrooms is the type of conversations that the students are having. In the class where interactions are occurring, the students are talking about every topic except the subject being taught by the teacher. They are having these discussions in an excited manner, they are speaking at a high volume, and they are exhibiting markers of positive emotions seen in the rap cypher, such as smiles, head nods, and a heightened use of gestures with their hands.

Therefore, a conclusion can be drawn that the nature of hip-hop culture’s ways of communicating is the ideal scenario when trying to get students to be actively engaged in the classroom. The key challenge for teachers is to find ways to allow students to focus on academic content during their classroom discussions. When this occurs, it is possible to get the class to the ideal scenario of the level 2 transaction.

The second level of the transaction occurs when there are a steady number of gestures, an increased but not high volume in the classroom, and constant conversations about the content being taught. At this level of the transaction, there is a level of working noise in the classroom, students are highly engaged, conversations about the content are rampant and free flowing, and the students’ ability to show what they have learned increases.

**Citizenship in the Classroom**

In order for students to be active participants in the classroom and for classrooms to operate consistently at the transaction phase, it is necessary for the students to feel so deeply connected to the classroom that they see themselves as citizens of the classroom. In fact, this belief in citizenship of the classroom is one of the most powerful attributes of participants in hip-hop. For many people, their allegiance to hip-hop and their ability to marry this allegiance to their deep connections to other things that define them makes them unique and important to the culture and growth of hip-hop. This broad allegiance to hip-hop mirrors citizenship in the sense
that participants in hip-hop are deeply committed to it, talk about it often, and consistently do their best to be part of the activities that support it. This phenomenon bears a significant resemblance to the ways that citizens in a nation express their allegiance to their country. This phenomenon (being deeply connected to more than one culture as long as there is an opportunity to express one’s hip-hop culture) can be viewed as a dual citizenship. There is a core citizenship in hip-hop and another in any space that allows them to express their hip-hopness. This is why participants in hip-hop are as committed to spaces like the rap cypher as they are to hip-hop itself. In fact, the proliferation of hip-hop culture in sports like basketball is simply the result of the ability of participants in hip-hop to feel like they can express themselves in the sport. This is why many urban youth are dedicated citizens in both basketball and hip-hop and express transactions when they discuss their involvement in both fields.

With an understanding of the way in which students hold multiple citizenships, it becomes evident that if educators want to improve student participation, there has to be an effort to provide an avenue for students to achieve citizenship in the classroom. In other words, students have to see the classroom as part of who they are and not a separate entity from either their hip-hopness or their self as an athlete or even as an American. Once this occurs they are more likely to engage in transactions and become more active participants in the classroom.

Full citizenship, like full participation, is most effective when it is not bestowed upon or given (Bohman, 1997). In order for full citizenship to be attained, and for all students to fully participate in all processes that relate to their success in the science classroom, the structures of the classroom must be changed to allow students to attain citizenship for themselves. This requires the enactment of three distinct activities that provide three different types of citizenship. These practices are the 3 C’s (cogenerative dialogues, coteaching, and cosmopolitanism) that I have used successfully in urban sci-

“This broad allegiance to hip-hop mirrors citizenship in the sense that participants in hip-hop are deeply committed to it, talk about it often, and consistently do their best to be part of the activities that support it.”
ence classrooms and that have the potential to benefit other classrooms as well. These 3 C’s are seen in some form within hip-hop and are the means through which youth become full citizens in hip-hop even if they are not from the same backgrounds as traditional hip-hop participants.

The Three Strands of Citizenship and the Three C’s

Full citizenship, which is the process that allows for full participation, is made up of civil, political, and social citizenship. Civil citizenship pertains to developing cordialness between citizens. Civil citizenship is the ongoing process where participants in a shared activity (whether it is the rap cypher or the classroom) have value for each other and treat each other with a level of respect and civility. It is seen in the rap cypher as each participant gives every person a handshake or head nod before and after each session where they rap. Engaging in a process like this ensures that everyone involved knows that he or she is equally respected in the classroom. Political citizenship refers to the citizens’ participation in the behind-the-scenes process of building the nation. In the rap cypher it is the process in which all participants equally plan for the upcoming cypher. They all recruit rappers, scout a location together, and recruit the person who will provide the rhythm to which they will rap. This process allows everyone to feel like they have a part to play in the shared experience they will engage in. Social citizenship deals with developing a general responsibility among citizens. It is expressed in the rap cypher through each person’s fulfillment of their roles as cheerleader for each of the people who raps, support for the person who is having a challenge delivering a rap, and co-orchestrator of the entire experience.

Civil citizenship is achieved in the classroom when teachers engage in cogenerative dialogues with students about the classroom and use students’ thoughts about improving the classroom when they teach. These dialogues are a process in which four students from a class are invited to have a conversation with the teacher about issues that inhibit them from learning or from participating in the classroom. These dialogues occur once a week over the course of an academic school year and provide the teacher with an opportunity to be cordial and informal with students even if he or she is unable to do so in the regular classroom. Once the students in these dialogues share their perceptions of what is going on in the classroom and students’ suggestions are implemented, a level of civil citizenship in the classroom is attained. As the school year progresses, new students are invited into the dialogues and students who have been in the dialogues for a while volunteer to opt out. Over time, if this practice is repeated, the teacher gets an opportunity to have these informal dialogues with just about all of the students in the classroom. I find that once this occurs, students are more apt to push to participate in the classroom.

Political citizenship aligns with the second C: coteaching. This process goes beyond conventional coteaching and positions students as the teachers of the class. Students are invited to plan lessons with teachers, make recommendations for instruction, design classroom assignments, and then teach a class. This introduction of students to the behind-the-scenes life of the teacher provides students with opportunities for political citizenship while they retain their position as students. Furthermore, it allows the teacher to learn from students about the ways to communicate with other students and get them involved in the teaching.

The final strand of citizenship is social citizenship. It is enacted in the classroom through cosmopolitanism. In this process, students who have already formed connections to each other outside of the classroom or who are friends in the class are held responsible for each other’s academic performances. This process is more effective when a low-performing student is partnered with a friend who is doing well in the class. To support the development of this responsibility for one another, the teacher can discuss with students how the higher-performing student’s grade increases by the same increment.
as the lower-performing student’s grade. I find that creating structures in the class that allow students to support each other in their academic work causes the students to ensure that everyone is actively participating in the classroom.

Summary

Through this article, I hope to make clear that there are messages about participation in the classroom that students provide to educators by their reactions to the ways they are taught. My use of hip-hop and the rap cypher are merely an anchor to drive home the point that students’ participation in cultural phenomena where they are truly engaged should mirror how teachers engage them in the classroom. If students can memorize hundreds of rap songs, analyze the lyrics of the song, learn new dance moves, organize cyphers, and create their own raps, but cannot remember a science formula, analyze literature, solve a math problem, or work actively in a group within the classroom, there is a lesson to be learned by educators. That lesson is that something must be done to make that student feel like he or she is a part of the classroom. Through my study of hip-hop, it is evident that it functions to ensure that its participants feel like they are full citizens in not only hip-hop, but in every hip-hop activity they engage in.

The chief idea that should be taken from this article is that classroom participation is a process that goes beyond conventional notions of what it looks like. It is a multilayered process that relies upon social and cultural dynamics that oftentimes lie beyond the classroom. In contemporary education, the reality has to be accepted that students often form alliances to each other under the banner of cultural phenomena like hip-hop. These phenomena are such a significant part of who they are, or such a significant tool for making sense of the classroom, that if they are ignored, it only serves to weaken our collective goal of helping students to connect to school and education. My call for expanding participation

“My use of hip-hop and the rap cypher are merely an anchor to drive home the point that students’ participation in cultural phenomena where they are truly engaged should mirror how teachers engage them in the classroom.”
to include active communication is rooted in the spirit of our forefathers in education, like John Dewey, who mentions that communication should be “a process of sharing experience till it becomes a common possession” (Dewey, 1916, p. 12) and says that “Communication is the process of creating participation” (Dewey, 1934, p. 253). Following Dewey’s message, it becomes clear that focusing on hip-hop culture and student citizenship in the classroom is not a suggestion but a responsibility. Hip-hop is a culture built on active participation, and full citizenship in the classroom is the process where education becomes a possession that both the teacher and students have in common and in which they share citizenship.

As newly-emerging phenomena penetrate the lives of students in schools, progressive educators must not only study them, but use them to ensure that there are no divides between students and school. It is our charge to ensure that all youth can remain who they are and still have the space to become who they want to be and who they can be through the types of instruction that we provide to them.

References


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<td>St. Louis, MO: Sep. 17-18</td>
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<td>Oklahoma City, OK: Oct. 29-30</td>
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