

Tear the Walls Down: A Case for Abolitionist Pedagogy in Arts Education Teacher Training Programs

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ABSTRACT

This article takes an investigative look at the role hip hop pedagogy could play in the liberation of Black Indigenous People of Color (BIPOC) students through arts education curriculum while simultaneously interrogating the role of white co-conspirators in a school context. This article explores the connections between hip hop pedagogy and culturally responsive arts education in a 21st century arts education framework through exploring the usage of the hip hop cipher in classroom settings. Furthermore, this article explores the concept of abolitionist pedagogy and the role white educators should play in the culpability of the liberation movement of BIPOC students. Ideas of anti-racism, white fragility, and the violence perpetrated by schools on BIPOC students are highlighted in an attempt to mitigate further damage of BIPOC youth.

INTRODUCTION

The convergence of the COVID-19 pandemic and the pandemic of systemic racism has engendered an investigation into the original sin of modernity. Recently, I rewatched DuVernay's film *When They See Us* (WTSU) on Netflix which is a four part series detailing the infamous case of the Exonerated Five a.k.a. The Central Park Five. Unlike the documentary *13th*,¹ WTSU is a dramatized retelling of the story using historical facts pieced together from newspapers, police taps, interviews, etc. Without going into specifics of the case, suffice it to say it was a case of BIPOC teenage boys being presumed guilty before being afforded the privilege of innocent before proven guilty (DuVernay, 2019). Indeed the presumption of innocence is a fundamental right rarely afforded to BIPOC youth, or, as Anna Deavere Smith describes it, "Rich kids get 'mischief', poor kids get pathologized and incarcerated" to emphasize how society can work against those living in the margins (Zea, 2018).

Although, I am no longer a K-12 classroom teacher, I do remember my strategy of shifting their energies and it was always me standing at the door to greet them and let them know that at this moment we are in this together. Being an effective teacher requires an incredible amount of patience and hope, or, as Dr. Shawn Ginwright calls it in his seminal work, *Hope and Healing in Urban Education: How Urban Activists and Teachers are Reclaiming Matters of the Heart*, "radical hope" and "radical love" (2015, p. 38) to be effective in holistically educating BIPOC students. The hope that despite all of the historical evidence to the contrary that one day BIPOC students could inhabit a full life of liberation from the structural oppression and violence enacted upon them daily by the very same system meant to lead to their emancipation.

This article is being written during the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement following the deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Tayler, Ahmaud Arbery, Rashard Brooks, Dominique Fells, Riah Milton and countless other slain Black lives. As an intersectional scholar who interrogates systems of inequality macrocosmically, I understand that a conversation on the educational industrial complex cannot happen in a vacuum without acknowledging that the first system of structural

¹ *13th* is a documentary by DuVernay in which "scholars, activists, and politicians analyze the criminalization of African Americans and the U. S. prison boom" (2016).

violence most BIPOC youth face first-hand is that of institutions of learning. Just as a white officer knelt on the neck of George Floyd for over eight minutes, I have witnessed white educators and those of other hues use metaphorical knees to suffocate the dreams of BIPOC youth. This article is an indictment of the system as it currently exists in hopes of filing a motion towards reimagining the future of our schools. To be clear: this article will not offer any resolutions—only a rumination to dismantle the current system in order to rebuild it into what it should have been from the beginning.

INTERROGATING THE SYSTEM

The function of schools should be to educate and liberate BIPOC students, thus giving way to the ideological underpinnings of abolitionist pedagogy brilliantly articulated by critical race theorist Dr. Bettina Love in the work, *We Want to Do More Than Survive: Abolitionist Teaching and the Pursuit of Educational Freedom*:

To achieve the goals of abolitionist teaching, we must demand the impossible and employ a radical imagination focused on intersectional justice through community building and grassroots organizing...to help educators understand and recognize America and its schools as spaces of Whiteness, White rage, and White supremacy, all of which function to terrorize students of color. (Love, 2020, pp. 12-13)

Thus, we cannot expect schools, school administration, teachers, or other extensions of white supremacy culture to be both oppressor and liberator. In fact, in the truest Freirean principles of binary concepts, it is impossible. Schools should serve to break the cycle of structural violence that is perpetuated by systems of oppression such as criminal justice, housing, and health care. Instead, schools which should be a pathway towards freedom have turned into a tool used for manipulation to indoctrinate BIPOC students into white supremacy culture.

Many schools function to serve the interest of the prison industrial complex. *How?* By not providing curriculum that aims to teach critical thinking skills based in culturally relevant pedagogy, or, as Dr. Christopher Emdin in *For White Folks Who Teach in the Hood...and the Rest of Y'all Too* calls it, “reality pedagogy,” (Emdin, 2017, p. 27)

which has formed a school of thought he coined in his upcoming book, *Ratchetdemic* (2021). The goal of ratchetdemicology is to value the intuition knowledge that BIPOC students bring into the classroom over the institutional knowledge they are being force-fed through whitewashed curriculum which does not speak to their epistemological understanding of self which has been forged through the genius of their lived experiences. Which is to say that BIPOC students' ancestral wisdom passed down epigenetically is just as valuable as information said students will acquire over the course of their academic careers from an institution. The same ancestral wisdom that helped Harriet Tubman use the stars to navigate towards liberation for herself and her people. Tubman did not formally study astrology or cosmology in a school. In fact, as an enslaved person it was illegal for her or any other enslaved person to learn how to read, write, or attend formal educational institutions. So her knowledge acquisition and survival hinged on her intuition knowledge of the universe. Indeed, in another era perhaps she would have been an astrophysicist, but in her time, she used her genius to be an abolitionist. Dare I posit that ancestral or intuition knowledge which is innate to BIPOC students is even more valuable than what any institution could ever teach them?

In the book *Cultivating Genius: An Equity Framework for Culturally and Historically Responsive Literacy*, Dr. Gholdy Muhammad articulates that:

History from Black communities tells us that educators don't need to empower youth or give them brilliance or genius. Instead, the power and genius is already within them. Genius is the brilliance, intellect, ability, cleverness, and artistry that have been flowing through their minds and spirits across the generations. This cultivation calls for reaching back into students' histories and deeply knowing them and their ancestries to teach in ways that raise, grow, and develop their existing genius. (Muhammad & Love, 2020, p. 13)

In the above text Muhammad further accentuates the pricelessness of ancestral wisdom. In order to break the cycle of generational trauma inflicted upon BIPOC students in the educational industrial complex, it is necessary to reimagine the role of schools in our society and the role of white educators from that of an ally to that of a co-conspirator.

“Why?” Because as long as those with power function to protect the status quo they will never give up their position to that power leaving those living within the margins on the outside looking in.

It has been articulated by multiple unknown sources that allies take up space while co-conspirators take up risk. As a co-conspirator, white educators should aspire to be culpable in the liberation of BIPOC students. However, white educators cannot move from ally to co-conspirator without first confronting their privilege, “White folx cannot be co-conspirators until they deal with the emotionality of being White...Studying Whiteness, White rage, and violence is a fundamental step to moving from ally to co-conspirator” (Love, 2020, p. 144) elucidating the necessity for white people to negotiate their privilege in a space like an educational institution which has never been a neutral space, or, as Ibram X. Kendi writes in *How to be an Antiracist*, “Just as racist power racializes people, racist power racializes space” (2019, p. 169). Furthermore, white race theorist Robin Diangelo in her book titled, *White Fragility: Why It’s So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism* details the inoculation in white supremacist culture for white people was a byproduct of being born white and although most white people “[w]ould not choose to be socialized into racism and white supremacy. Unfortunately, we didn’t have that choice” (2018, p. 69). She then goes on to write, “Now it is our responsibility to grapple with how this socialization manifests itself in our daily lives and how it shapes our responses when it is challenged” (Diangelo, 2018, p. 69), vividly detailing the necessary work white people need to do in order to reconcile with the privilege brought onto them by their whiteness.

Dare I posit that until a white educator has committed to doing the work necessary to fix one’s self that they will never be fully engaged in the process of liberating BIPOC students in a system of structural oppression that historically has benefited white people? This ideology is the foundation of Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*; using binary concepts, “Leaders who do not act dialogically, but insist on imposing their decisions, do not organize the people—they manipulate them. They do not liberate, nor are they liberated: they oppress” (2000, p. 178), further compounding the pandemic of structural violence perpetuated in schools against BIPOC students. My intention through this article is not to provide a complete roadmap for white educators. Conversely, my people have been trying for over 400 years to try to

encourage white people to see our brilliance and recruit those willing to do the necessary righteous work over to the side of abolition, and frankly, it has gotten tiresome. The horses have been led to water for centuries and many of them have continually refused to drink. So, in true abolitionist call-in culture, if a white educator is willing to move from oppressor to liberator, then that is a journey said educator must take, first, independently, and secondly, collectively with others like them.

TOWARDS ABOLITION

In order to move more towards abolition, educators and school administrators—particularly those who are white and in power or those who have proximity to whiteness and power—must ask themselves what are they willing to give up in order to give in to the ancestral wisdom of BIPOC students? One such way is the incorporation of Hip Hop pedagogy into academic spaces and curriculum. In his book, *Hip Hop Genius: Remixing High School Education*, Sam Seidel cautions against the dangers of only teaching students canonized texts mandated by curricular standards:

The enforcement of such beliefs can alienate students, deny educators the freedom to be creative, prevent students from being exposed to many excellent texts, and perpetuate racism, classism, sexism, and other systems of haterations. (2013, p. 90)

Seidel further posits:

If hip-hop education is not limited to using hip-hop culture to entice students or engaging hip-hop music as content to study for the purpose of teaching academic skills, but instead is a continuation of the traditions of popular education and critical pedagogy, then it can be a movement toward liberation. (2013, p. 93)

This further expounds upon the usage of hip-hop pedagogy as a means of abolitionist teaching.

Delving into one specific aspect of hip-hop culture and the integration of hip-hop pedagogy with theatre pedagogy lies at the cross

sectional investigation of the phenomena of the cipher. Individuals stand in a circle almost equidistant from each other while displaying incredible verbal agility in an act that is equal parts defiance and collaboration. Call and response often plays an integral role in ciphers and requires the full attention of all members of the cipher, even those with a more passive role. Active listening is a crucial component in making a cipher successful. Indeed, the person speaking is looking to other members of the cipher for affirmation that the words they are saying are resonating with people both literally and figuratively. The cipher, in many ways, is collaboration personified.

Etymologically, the word cipher which comes from, “Middle French as *cifre* and Medieval Latin as *cifra*, from the Arabic صفر *sifr* = zero. ‘Cipher’ was later used for any decimal digit.”² Now, given what we know about binary code, it is all either a numerical “0” or a “1.” Furthermore, cipher, as a noun, according to Merriam-Webster’s dictionary, can also mean “a message in code” (2020) along with other possible meanings. Indeed, the cipher of which I speak takes place when people stand equidistant in a perfect circle facing one another in an exchange of words, sounds, energy, and frequencies. This is clearly a code—or at least a set of rules that may seem like chaos to an outsider not familiar with the phenomena—that allows for the interjection of words, sounds, or phrases by individual participants without rejection from the group. These interjections are known as ad-libs. The ad-lib serves multiple purposes in a cipher: it can encourage the speaker with the spotlight to continue on with their rhyme scheme; it could call attention to the fact that the participant who is adding the ad-lib is actively listening to the main speaker; or, it could be used as an alarm alerting the other participants of the cipher that the person who is adding the ad-lib is now ready to join the cipher as the primary speaker. One popular contemporary hip-hop group that effectively uses the ad-lib to add emphasis and color to their rhyme delivery is the trio the Migos, who is probably best known for their 2018 single ‘Bad and Bougie.’³ In it, many ad-libs can be heard throughout the song used by various members of the group to give a distinguishing characteristic to their oratorical catalog. What type of arts educator would oppose seeing students as actively engaged in one of their lessons as participants are in a hip-hop cipher?

² Cipher etymology by [etymology.com](https://www.etymology.com)

³ [‘Bad and Bougie’ lyrics, by Migos](#)

As an artist scholar I can see direct parallels with the skills developed in a cipher to the skills developed during improvisational (improv) theatre games, many of which also take place in a circle. It was education professor and author Marc Lamont Hill that first asked the question, “How could the notion of a ‘hip-hop cipher,’ which marks the democratic ethos of hip-hop culture, allow us to reimagine classroom participation?” (2009, p. 124), which further articulates my line of inquiry of the foundational democratic similarities between cipher participation and improvisation. The first rule of improv is to say, ‘yes and’, which is also the fundamental principle a hip-hop cipher is built off of. More parallels can be drawn in the use of techniques such as ad-libs that appear in both forms of art as well. Both art forms require a certain mental dexterity that require in-the-moment decision making. My goal is to continually build connections between what is taught as theatre education in traditional school settings (i.e., improv games) and what we could be taught as part of a hip hop infused curriculum (i.e., the cipher).

CONCLUSION

Hip-Hop scholar Brian Mooney developed a pedagogical framework that he calls “Breakbeat Pedagogy” in a book by the same name which he describes as, “the art of the Hip Hop event...to initiate a democratic space for the elements to live and thrive within a school community” (2016, p. 52). Mooney goes on to write about his positionality as a white hip hop pedagogue which serves as a call to action for other white educators:

Coming to understand and accept my own privilege is a lifelong process...As uncomfortable as it might be, we must process the terms of our own privileges and reflect on what it means for us as teachers. This is perhaps the most ‘Hip Hop’ thing we can do. (2016, pp. 6-7)

This could not be a more honest statement. If an educator—white or otherwise—cannot be authentic, then their method to reach BIPOC students will simply not fully connect regardless of how “culturally relevant” (Ladson-Billings, 1995) their curriculum is made to be. Hip

hop culture is but a refracted perspective of individuals who have been traditionally marginalized and shut out from mainstream society by a refusal of that mainstream society to allow those individuals to fully assimilate. If an educator training program does not prepare teachers to understand and cultivate BIPOC students holistically from an epicenter of “radical love” (Ginwright, 2015) and abolitionist pedagogy, then that program is ultimately being built on a house of cards that perpetuates violence against the same students those teachers took a silent oath to liberate. And similar to other houses made of cards, that program will eventually crumble.

SUGGESTED CITATION

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