# Back to its Roots:
Hip-Hop Pedagogy as a Form of Civic Engagement

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Historically, young people have always exercised their rights in speaking out against social injustice and advocating for human rights. The perspective of young people is often left out of politics as adults dominate the discourse, causing them to find alternative means to make their voices heard. In the early 1900s, young people played a pivotal role in protesting alongside adults for child labor reform against harsh and dangerous working conditions in factories, which resulted in most states implementing child labor laws. The Civil Rights Movement attracted youth as young as twelve-years-old who participated in protests and sit-ins to end racial discrimination and gain equal rights under the law (Library of Congress, n.d.). More recently, young people have led the Black Lives Matter movement against violence and systemic racism toward Black people. Students across the U.S. have organized school walkouts in protest for gun control legislation, in response to an overwhelming number of school mass shootings. And across the world, youth have organized and led strikes to demand action on climate change.

Research would suggest that young people are not engaged in politics (Putnam, 2000; Wilkins, 2000), when in fact they are involved through alternative and more innovative ways compared to older generations. During the 21st century, youth have shifted to an "engaged citizenship" model by volunteering, protesting, and incorporating politics in their daily lives (Shea and Harris, 2006; Schlozman, Verba, and Brady, 2010). Young people engage in participatory politics, interactive, peer-based acts through which individuals and groups seek to exert both voice and influence on issues of public concern (Kahne, Middaugh, and Allen, 2014). The political views
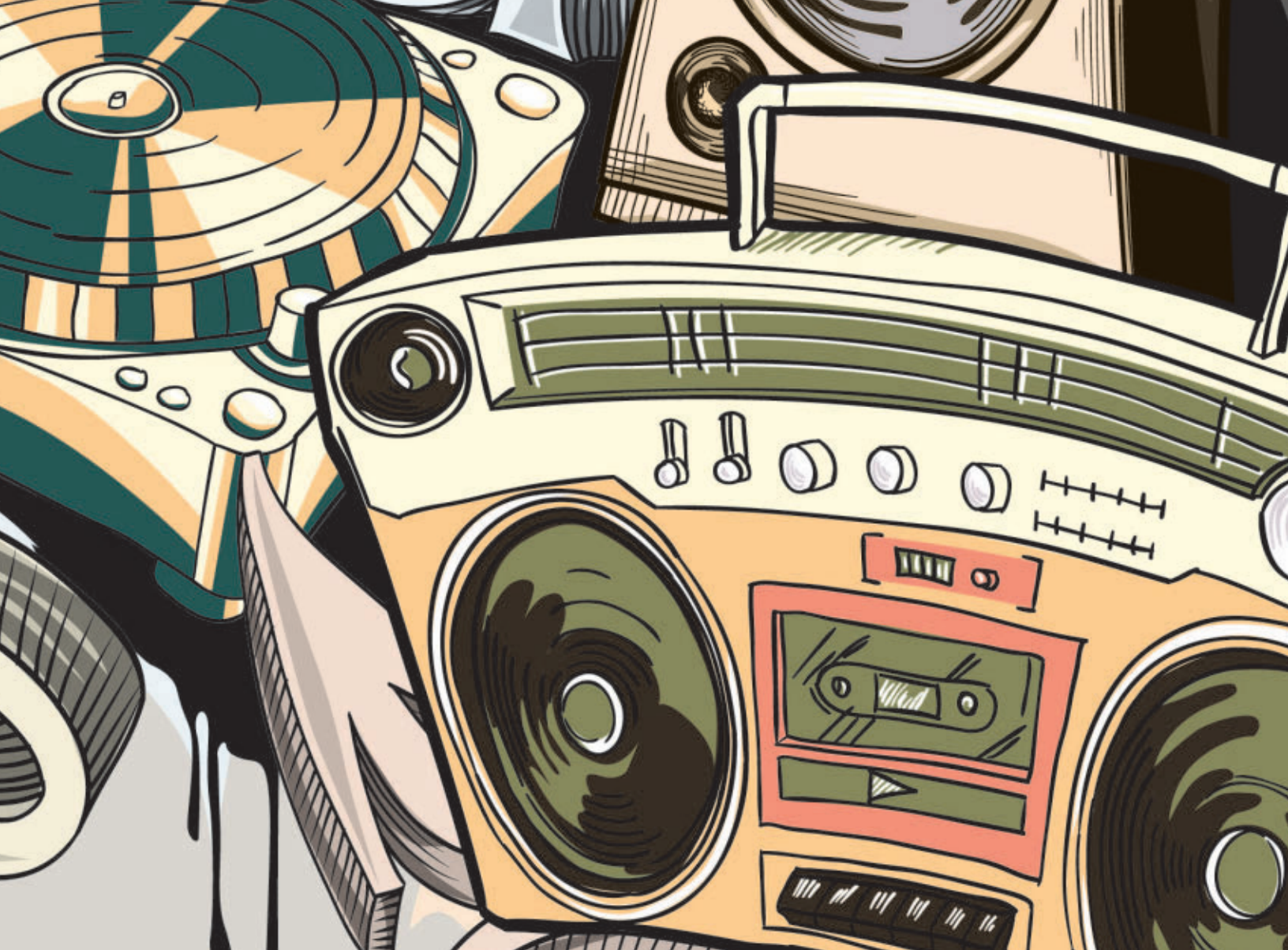
and opinions of young people are mainly expressed, consumed, and remixed peer-to-peer through online social networks (Cohen et al., 2012). Technology, social media in particular, has changed the landscape of youth civic engagement. The affordability of technology makes it possible for young people to access political information, express their opinions, circulate information, and mobilize far more easily and widely than ever before.

Today's youth are our leaders of tomorrow and their political perspectives are shaped by their unique experiences and realities. Therefore, it is imperative for educators to create opportunities within their classrooms for students to form political identities and take action against social injustices, especially those that directly impact students.

Anchoring hip-hop culture as a pedagogical tool to promote civic engagement proves to be a viable option for teachers, especially considering the history of hip-hop's nuanced culture. Research argues for the use of hip-hop pedagogy as an approach to teaching and learning that is derived from the creative elements of hip-hop culture (MC, breakdancing, DJing, graffiti, and knowledge of self), which serves as a culturally relevant approach to teaching and promotes civic engagement among students (Adjapong, 2017).

To understand the use of hip-hop as an approach to teaching and learning, it is important to first recognize that hip-hop is more than a music genre. Hip-hop culture has impacted and empowered youth populations across the globe, especially youth who identify as part of marginalized groups (Adjapong

and Emdin, 2015; Dunley, 2000). Hip-hop began as a social justice movement in direct response to the deterioration of the Bronx in the 1970s and 1980s caused by a steady rise in crime, a struggling economy, budget cuts to key social services (i.e., fire and police departments), and one of the largest construction projects (the Cross Bronx Expressway) that the Bronx borough has experienced (Gonzalez, 2004). Hip-hop music and culture arose out of this social and economic crisis as a way to build strong communal ties in times of economic and social hardship. It provided an outlet and a voice for young people in the Bronx, who organized and attended block parties to escape their unfortunate realities. It enabled them to survive in and adapt to their environment (Atwater and Crockett, 2003; Bullivant, 1989).

At its core, hip-hop is a culture, first and foremost, and a music genre that is critical of the sociopolitical climate and shares the realities of those who have been marginalized. An important, but often unrecognized, creative element of hip-hop culture is knowledge of self. Afrika Bambaataa, a DJ who is called the godfather of hip-hop, defines knowledge of self as a central component of hip-hop culture. Bambaataa, along with many hip-hop purists, believe that knowledge of self is central because participants of hip-hop culture must remember that hip-hop was created as a social-political movement. Knowledge of self is central to hip-hop as it encourages participants to be aware of who they are, authentic to themselves, and confident enough to utilize hip-hop culture as a tool to create positive social-political change for their communities.

Hip-hop pedagogy draws from the framework of culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1994). It focuses on understanding youth culture as it is exhibited in students' communities and using that understanding of students' youth culture and their communities to improve teacher effectiveness. Culturally relevant pedagogy encourages teachers to immerse themselves so deeply in their students' culture through actual engagement with them that it becomes second nature to find ways to develop student interest in, and natural affinity for, learning. Culturally relevant pedagogy also motivates teachers

to provide opportunities for students "to accept and affirm their cultural identity while developing critical perspectives that challenge inequities that are found in schools" and communities (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p.469).

Hip-hop pedagogy encourages educators to increase civic engagement by creating opportunities for students to be critical of and challenge social, political, and education systems that contribute to the marginalization of any group. Teachers can enable students to identify inequalities that directly impact them and/or that exist on the local/community, national, or global levels. Once students (with the support of educators) identify inequalities, educators can task students to develop two categories of innovative solutions. The first category includes possible solutions that can be implemented if students had unlimited resources and no constraints. The second category should be more practical given the means of the school, classroom, and students – what can students do within their classroom to raise awareness of social issues? Educators should find ways to make connections between students' civic engagement and content. For example, in science classrooms, students can develop possible solutions to health disparities and environmental inequalities. In social studies classrooms, students can develop possible solutions to laws and policies, empowering them to give input into the historical markers of today, such as immigration reform and voting fraud. In English Language Arts classes, students can form arguments and provide reasoning to address social issues that directly impact them.

These strategies and the hip-hop pedagogy framework can open doors for educators to reimagine how pedagogy can promote student voice and agency. Furthermore, the hip-hop pedagogy framework equips students with the skills to develop critical consciousness, so they can thoughtfully participate in civic engagement and critique oppressive systems and structures long after high school.

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