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From The Cipher to The Classroom - *Pathology or Promise?*

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Criteria	Ex	VG	Good	Fair	Poor	Comment
Introduction (statement of problem, response to task)						
Range and use of appropriate sources						
Development of argument (analysis, interpretation)						
Conclusions (application, findings, outcomes)						
Presentation, language, academic conventions						

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Copy of this sheet must accompany all written.

Global Critical Revolutionary Hiphop Pedagogy

From The Cipher to The Classroom
Pathology or Promise?

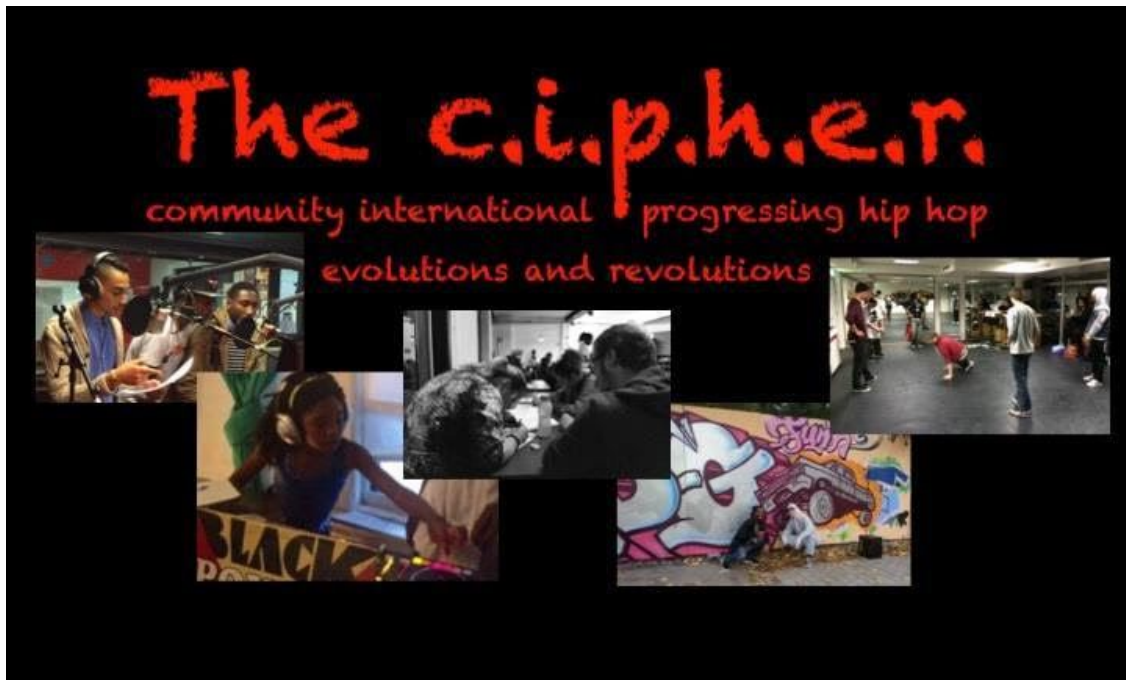
For
R, T, R & C

Elayne Adamczyk Harrington
15723401

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Year 1.

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Introduction - *True School*

“F**k a desk and a lunch break, cutting through that red tape
Temple of Hip-hop, that's the escape.” (KRS-One, 2014).¹

The above quote is from Brooklyn rapper KRS-One, born Lawrence ‘Kris’ Parker, known as ‘The Teacher’. His lyrical content is renowned for being based on radical and emancipatory education from a Hip-hop perspective. The lyrics succinctly encapsulate the school as an institution in its physical form, as a system and its connoted bureaucracy. This contrasts with the fluid freedom made attainable through revolutionary Hip-hop pedagogy which can be interpreted from the second line. The negative imagery contained within this rhyme is not evident in the accompanying image, although a school-based learning environment is pictured. The photographs feature moments from Hip-hop workshop activities which convey the four elements of Hip-hop - rapping, turntablism, graffiti and breakdancing. There is text presented as an acronym which spells: ‘Cipher’ - a Hip-hop term that denotes the continuity of the circle, a zero - infinity. The cipher is utilised in group work and social engagement as a guide for the communicative and social aspects of Hip-hop, ranging from rap ciphers to B-boy battles. Each letter stands for *Community International Progressing Hip-hop Evolutions and Revolutions*.

The content of the image will be analysed through the theme of strengths perspective and the principles of this practice as seen through a Hip-hop lense. The research sets out to identify where deficit thinking may linger in the realm of

¹ The different genres and eras of rap in Hip-hop seem to be determining factors for the type and extent of ‘bad’ language used. The use of ‘cuss’ words in rap music remains a contentious topic today as it is thought to uphold misogynistic, violent and destructive attitudes. Although foul language may be a deterrent or cause for offence to the listener, expressive and emotive verbal communication has been a driving force for asserting the voice of Black American communities in Hip-hop culture, thus challenging oppression, marginalisation and invisibility. (Savali, 2015).

learning and attempts to investigate how that can be challenged. An observation of the radical educational vision of Brooklyn artist and educator teacher *spiritchild*² will highlight the *Black Arts Movement* approach to critical pedagogy and Hip-hop as a form of education, as well as an attitude that can enlighten the traditional global classroom. The Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP) *WRaPP Around* (Writing Reading and Performance Poetry) initiative will be referred to in its similar approach to teaching and learning throughout schools across the Irish nation.

This image is most pertinent to the research in that it paints the picture of a strengths based alternative model set against that of the archaic and injurious deficit thinking in education. References from a variety of theorists and educators include bell hook's writing on education, William Edward Burghardt Du Bois' phenomenon coined 'double consciousness' and additional examples of radical Hip-hop practitioners and pedagogues, as well as general sociological discourse to underpin particular theories.

² As with bell hooks, lowercase is the preferred manner of reference for spiritchild and his name is italicised only within the initial introduction. (Quintana, 2010)

Theme Detailed - *Ya Know The Rules*

"I come correct and practice what I preach
I don't pimp you or rule you - I teach" (KRS-One, 1990)

What is meant by 'pimping and ruling' in this rhyme? KRS-One speaks as the educator asserting his integrity in neither subordinating nor exploiting the student. Parker's consistent message in his musical and pedagogical values includes sociopolitics, faith, oppression, knowledge of self and one's own history. His work is built on the premise of Black progress and unity as well as science and technicality through Hip-hop. (Cannon, 2019). These topics feed into a social work dynamic known as strengths perspective, in that they all promote a focus on progression and ultimately liberty for the disadvantaged student. Social work academic Dennis Saleebey describes the recognition of the inherent knowledge in lived experience establishing the client as the 'expert' on their own life. (1992). Additional considerations being that the client discovers and brings to bear their obvious and latent strengths and focus is placed on client abilities, rather than their shortcomings or pathologies. (Chapin, 1995; Early & GlenMaye, 2000; Saleebey, 1992d; Weick et al., 1989).

This contrasts with the regressive damage that deficit thinking precipitates in education. "The culture and families of students are often implicated in their failure. The basis of this attribution lies in the construct of deficit thinking, an endogenous paradigm founded on race and class bias." (Valencia, 1997, p. 611). This proposes that deficit thinking blames the individual student for their failings and stereotypes the society from which they come in the same destructive manner. This may be based on family background, social stratification or ethnicity. Educator and author bell hooks recalls in *Teaching to Transgress* an undercurrent of stress diminishing her learning experience due to constantly being confronted with biases. (1994, p.5). This highlights how deficit thinking creates a school environment that is not conducive to learning. Potentially considerably less so for an already oppressed minority. The following section will take the preceding strengths and deficit considerations and apply them within the context of the Irish poor working class student, which will lead the study further into the topic of Hip-hop pedagogy.

Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) is a national programme developed by the Department of Education and Skills in Ireland (DES) to address educational disadvantage for students from socioeconomic underprivileged communities. The following terms can all be seen in the DEIS 3 Year Plan (2017-2020) for Beneavin De La Salle in Dublin: 'at risk', 'positive behaviour initiatives', 'early school leaver', 'dropout rate', 'behaviour support' and 'aspire to do better.' It is expected that such deficit language be expelled amidst the introduction of schemes

which appear to proffer a strengths based perspective. In spite of their best efforts to transform students' educational experiences, even DEIS schools still value bias over empathy and competition over quality of learning which results in negative experiences, particularly for the students considered 'weak' or 'troublesome'. The official language may change but is effective and lasting learning happening amidst a lingering condescension. The critical pedagogue expects this indicates a failure to employ working class professionals to assist in executing these syllabi adequately. The optimist asks if it could simply be the remnants of deficit thinking. Further on, the research will refer to a JCSP initiative to pursue evidence of resulting change in student experience.

At this point, reflection on Critical Revolutionary Hip-hop Pedagogy will assist thinking around the concept of the typical classroom. This will be followed by an analysis of the role of the teacher in traditional school settings, as compared to that of a radical Hip-hop educational environment. In writing of a new kind of education, hooks states:

Since the vast majority of students learn through conservative, traditional educational practices and concern themselves only with the presence of the professor, any radical pedagogy must insist that everyone's presence is acknowledged. (1994, p. 8).

The next chapter will broaden on spiritchild's Hip-hop pedagogical ideologies, but it is pertinent to mention here that hook's sentiments are shared by the Hip-hop producer and youth mentor, in theory and practice. He maintains that our pedagogy needs refinement, stating the educator must meet the youth 'where they are', starting from their experiences, goals and talents. (2014). When pitching the science and politics of Hip-hop, he asks: how can Hip-hop facilitate personal growth, self-awareness and community accountability? (2014) He defines Hip-hop's inherently social and strengths based disposition. Its elements have the power to express and reflect physical, mental, emotional and spiritual facets of the human experience and consciousness. Realised solo, Hip-hop can heal. As a social phenomenon, it can incite revolution. Even manifested as gangster rap or The Dozens³, however combative or raw the form may be, it remains communicative, enriching and confidence producing. Education does not limit itself to the banking system (Freire, 1968), information, language and verbal exchange, neither does Hip-hop education. Rap is not the only element, but in light of what Irish schools advocate in terms of literacy development, it seems a good place to start.

Since 1997 the JCSP Support Service has run initiatives where teachers are facilitated in introducing new and creative ways of working with the students. The purpose is to provide opportunities for teachers to develop and explore new strategies, methodologies and interventions to support student learning. (JCSP - Literacy Initiatives | PDST, n.d.)

³ 'The Dozens' is a term used to denote what in contemporary terms is known as 'battle rap'. "A dialect of insult - adolescents frequently make use of rhymes to express forbidden notions." (J. Dollard, 1939). This game or activity is thought to have its roots in the African work songs during slavery in U.S. colonial times and emerged later as 'call and response' within the jazz scene. (Elijah Wal, 2012).

Hiphop is a cultural movement and does not stand isolated as musical genre or stylistic modality. In a *Radical Teacher* journal, Christopher M. Tinson and Carlos REC McBride refer to: 'persistent resonance amongst youth and its expansive global recognition along with the reach it has displayed in traditional educational settings' (Issue 97, 2013, p.2). This brings me to the item of the traditional classroom space and whether or not a standard Irish classroom setting inhibits or supports spontaneity and creativity. Since major shifts in scheduling of classes or even seating arrangements happen solely during extracurricular lessons or transition year projects, it is not unreasonable to suspect that traditional education does not seek to promote spontaneity nor does it maintain the notion of education as freedom. "The classroom began to feel more like a prison, a place of punishment and confinement rather than a place of promise and possibility." (hooks, 1994, p. 4).

Even if the physical space remains unevolved, it is feasible to enhance or alter the learning by standing up, creating a cypher or working in pairs. These approaches do exist in schools, but Hiphop education can guarantee integral mind-body learning. This will be expanded upon in the next chapter. It offers something radical. The question begs asking: Is the curriculum reflective of the students' experiences, especially the students who fit the 'problem' profile? Are they enjoying an inclusive education and is school a social experience for them? The existence of meaningful, useful and empowering content which links to students' culture and current lives within the curriculum would enable greater engagement and benefit.

When a curriculum does not reflect the culture, interests, and realities of youths, they lose interest in learning and school. This disengagement often contributes to poor grades, behavior issues, and students dropping out of school. (Johnson, 2017).

Once the curriculum is developed in a more diverse way, the deficit hangover will truly subside as it will be freer to evolve along organic strengths perspective lines. The children who are apt to be ejected from class or separated from the cohort, those who are perhaps covertly, or indeed outwardly despised by the educator will have a chance to be understood. They can, in fact, be instrumental to their fellows' learning and instead of in the manner of assigning them a job under the guise of 'helper' by An Múinteoir.⁴ This action of which is patronising and reinforces the notion that if a learner cannot concentrate or carry out a given task as desired by the teacher or demanded by the system that labour is the only way they can be useful or involved. Why should a learner whose conduct is deemed 'inappropriate', whose high energy or manner is intimidating or unmanageable to a teacher have to be subdued or controlled? Through radical Hiphop learning experiences students find

⁴ 'The teacher' in the Irish language. (Irish Grammar Database: múinteoir, 2013).

and master ways of liberating themselves from the stereotypes that repress them, labels that isolate them and presumptions that cripple their ability to develop their own identities and make connections with others.

Teacher John Taylor Gatto, author of *Dumbing Us Down - The Hidden Curriculum of Compulsory Schooling* presents a critique of teaching, commencing with *The Seven Lesson School Teacher*. He presents seven lessons which he claims every school teacher teaches. The first lesson is entitled 'confusion':

Even in the best schools a close examination of curriculum and its sequences turns up a lack of coherence, full of internal contradictions. Fortunately the children have no words to define the panic and anger they feel at constant violations of natural order and sequence fobbed off on them as quality in education. (Gatto, 1992).

It is true that the standard school day and the lessons it contains do not blend fluidly, they are disparate and create more confusion than consolidation. Hip-hop allows for interconnectedness and synergy, facilitating the individual and group across any and all the elements they tap into. For example DJ-ing parallels with rhythmic and mental, rapping with verbal and emotional, breakdancing with the physical and graffiti with visual. Of course there are crossovers and many nuances. That is the beauty of Hip-hop. If a school-goer attempts to 'flow' in this way, if instinctual drives are carried out, which I will expand on in the personal reflection, the learner is likely to be punished, humiliated or both. This seems to only exacerbate the issues arising and it does not support academic success, school attendance and completion of education, nor does it offer meaningful growth or an opportunity to develop interpersonal relationships. The argument in this study points to the latter being the greater loss.

Theme Applied - *We Dem Teachers*

“When enrollment's down, crime is up
and if you can't hold your ground your time is up.” (KRS-One, 2016).

KRS One's statement may seem somewhat cynical. He starkly suggests that it is either school or the street and if one cannot 'hold their ground' on the street *or* in education, then it may be at the cost of life. The struggle to enter and remain in education *is* one of cynicism for most Black Americans. As Du Bois emphasised in *The Souls of Black Folk*:

Up the new path the advance guard toiled, slowly, heavily, doggedly; only those who have watched and guided the faltering feet, the misty minds, the dull understandings, of the dark pupils of these schools know how faithfully, how piteously, this people strove to learn. It was weary work. (1939, p.3).

Fortunately, there exists contemporary Black leaders such as KRS and spiritchild illuminating the path toward liberty through education. A photo at the centre of the image shows a learning activity, written reflections, mind-mapping or collaborative research. As well as rap, this could implicate the fifth element of Hip-hop - knowledge. The co-founder of *A New Black Arts Movement* asserts his purpose as to prefigure a new society guided by art which is equivalent to politics. The acronym defines the title of a European year-long project and lifelong network in which the following simple, yet profound idea was presented: the classroom or learning space (from seating to colours and aesthetics) has the potential to liberate the minds of the youth, so they can experiment, explore and express. (2014). This shift in the classroom set up is also apparent in the accompanying image. As previously mentioned, the integral mind-body learning power of Hip-hop transcends the mere physical presence of the body in the classroom. In considering embodied cognition, Hip-hop can be complementary to our understanding of the brain being in the head, the head in the body and the body in the social world. (Wilson, Foglia, 2011). Hip-hop can rouse deeper dialogue between all cognitive agents and create a narrative that may look more like a cipher than a linear path.

Another diversity in the imagery is that of the racial and ethnic kind. Tinson and Mc Bride refer to the debate and dialogue on this culture, its many traditions, rituals, political potential and its power, as well as its direct link to black liberation politics, radical education, Civil Rights and Black Liberation protest movements. (2013). Although these are reflections presented around America, the writers also refer to the global capacity that Hip-hop holds. Thanks to the international power of this cultural movement, the Irish youth can enjoy the fruits of existing creatively within a Hip-hop learning environment through projects such as *WRaPP Around* as described in the following chapter.

Personal Reflection - *You Must Learn*

What do you mean when you say I'm rebellious
'Cause I don't accept everything that you're telling us
What are you selling us the creator dwellin' us
I sit in your unknown class while you're failing' us
I failed your class 'cause I ain't with your reasoning
You're tryin' make me you by seasoning (Up my mind...)
(KRS-One, 1989)

This line from the Boogie Down Productions track from the album *Edutainment* encompasses perfectly the common confusion between dissent and disobedience in schools. KRS refers to lessons with skepticism, as though school subjects are pushed like products, cheapening education. His words rail against the commodification of learning and he expresses contempt at the attempt to push the state agenda unto the student. Philosopher and critic Ivan Illich elaborates on this from his 'deschooling' angle: 'This process undermines people – it diminishes their confidence in themselves, and in their capacity to solve problems... It kills convivial relationships. Finally it colonises life like a parasite or a cancer that kills creativity' (Finger and Asún 2001, p. 10). In the image we see young people creating their own learning. There is engagement that is otherwise impossible in the typical classroom. There is credible joy and enthusiasm, there is action and interaction. The diversity of activity and diversity of studentship shows promise that strengths based perspective is effortlessly eradicating deficit thinking through radical Hip-hop education.

Although poor Irish urban culture is not subjected to the same terror of the violent oppression, such as gravely unjust life/death sentencing, shooting bias or the misplaced and fatal stranglehold⁵ that instigated *Black Lives Matter*. Some of the narratives that found the Black/Irish solidarity may include: deaths in prison custody, classism deemed as entertainment and perpetuated by the national broadcaster for television and radio through harmful stereotypes and a seemingly university favourite - *Poorface*⁶. Rap music as stemming from Black American culture has for a long time spoken to the people of Irish working class Irish society. The connection, is evidenced in the results of the aforementioned JCSP literacy initiative that places 'problem students', ones who fit the profile, are ejected from class for behaviour issues, when they suffer because of their natural behaviour which is deemed aggressive or they are shunned, treated as defective or as a problem that needs fixing.

When introduced to forty students from first and second year in Ballinteer Community School (BCS) in April 2019, the greeting was phrased by a welcoming

⁵ This refers to the police brutality and manslaughter case of Eric Garner's on Staten Island. His death was one of several fatal encounters between Black people and the police that catalysed the national *Black Lives Matter* movement. (Benner, 2019).

⁶ *Poorface* refers to the fetishisation of working class culture, as in *Blackface* - historical racial mimicry, i.e.; *minstrelsy*. (Lott, 1992.)

teacher of the institution as follows: “Now these would be at risk of entering into the early school leaver category.” This was a once-off programme which was to run three times over a three week period, amounting to a total of four and a half hours with these forty students. It struck me that no matter what we could achieve during our workshops together, it would not change the attitude of the teaching body, nor would it alter the vernacular, realign or snap the rigid red tape. Being an underqualified, mere extracurricular and autodidactic rap mentor, I began to feel the weight of my own personal and professional deficits. The inevitable strengths perspective of Hiphop did carry me through though and upon commencing the first year of my Professional Masters in Education I decided I would apply to that school as my placement. Some months later, I returned, a somewhat less novice student teacher learning and teaching simultaneously under my newly acquired ‘at promise’ status, this time focusing on visual art education. (Swadner, Lubeck, 1995). The BCS JCSP rap project certainly had strengths based principles running throughout, but the way in which it differs from what is pictured in the C.I.P.H.E.R. image is that time was more limited in this workshop series. The chance to build relationships and further encourage independent plus peer to peer learning was lessened, which meant I had to facilitate and instruct considerably more than what can be seen of youth mentors in the discussion image - all of whom demonstrate more of an autonomous air through their body language. A brief comparison of both images easily suggests that the physical learning environment may factor in the success of the project. It is noteworthy that *WRaPP Around* was carried out in a study hall in which the school hosts detention.



Conclusion - *Edutainment*

"...I became a landmark, in the Hiphop field of art
I shed light, yet my skin is dark."

"...through knowledge they'll never con me." (KRS-One, 1990)

The final rap quote from KRS One seems to eloquently capture the content covered in this sociological study of education. He consolidates the findings from a strengths based perspective, highlighting his personal victory, whilst asserting his mission to enlighten others, which implies the social and collaborative urgency of Hiphop. He does however, close in remembrance of the damage that imposed deficit thinking and the resulting oppression that has had to endure due to his being Black. The research has shown that the deficit thinking model is dated and is essentially obsolete but may take another few generations to be entirely weeded out of society as it is still present even in the school policy language we reviewed. There is glaring hope in the alternative and all the research maintains that strengths perspective is the way forward for education in Ireland. These principles are being fostered by current and ongoing schemes and initiatives that run mainly in DEIS schools via programmes such as JCSP.

The consideration for a stronger working class professional presence in education and the role of the teacher were put forward. The philosophy and practice of Hiphop educator spiritchild and other radical pedagogies coupled with an exploration of student autonomy, sprung from the discussion image proved the transformational power of critical pedagogy through Hiphop education. The thinking of John Talyor Gatto helped in critiquing the unnatural manner in which schooling unfolds, lacking in 'flow'. The obsession to excel and be gratified in terms of good behaviour, grades and talent was noted as pervasive in school institutions. In order to challenge this, the findings deem it necessary to consider class and social status of students in terms of inclusion but to actively avoid falling into deficit thinking patterns and focusing on pathologies of perceived problems that need solving. Although policies and legislation are in place, it can be seen that the dignity, individuality and full potential of disadvantaged students is not being supported.

An aid to this consists of building relationships, recognising the limitations of the school institution and attaining a more expansive view of learning as pitched through the radical discourse of Hiphop. The encouragement of global and local creative community was posed as a way to harness diverse and critical thinking in our schools. The Impact of projects like *WRaPP Around* was factored in when considering how students identify with Black American life as understood through rap music and Hiphop culture as a movement and not solely a genre. The accompanying image which anchored the study is a picture of diversity, collaboration and the vibrancy of Hiphop education as presented through a strengths perspective. Although set against a black backdrop, it seems to be framed by that which may well represent a memory or indeed a reality of an enduring deficit. In this case perhaps deficit defines strength.

**Transcript of rap and spoken word piece written collaboratively by a group of four
2nd Years in Ballinteer Community School for the JCSP WRaPP Around, 2019.**

'FLOW'

Respect's for free.
Tupac - a rapper, a dealer and a G,
His mother was a revolutionary
(with her own hang ups),
Tupac was born into Hiphop,
Hiphop was born in the Bronx.
They used drugs to forget about bad things in life...
Group knocks, people get shot, Garda chase
Take 10 toes
Stick to the number 1 rule:
DON'T GET CAUGHT.
Don't let ops run you down.
Split, bounce, bail, leggit, peggit.
The Gardaí don't respect - pay back with laughter
You can't retort with aggression.
Boldness: trouble, disrespect...the likes of fleecing and stroking.
Opposition
Disempower
Empowerment

Don't get caught.

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