DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 353 588 CS 213 653

AUTHOR Anderson, Edward
TITLE Positive Use of Rap Music in the Classroom.
PUB DATE [93]
NOTE 18p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Guides - Classroom Use - Teaching Guides (For Teacher) (052)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Black Culture; Black Dialects; Class Activities; Elementary Secondary Education; Language Usage; *Music; *Persuasive Discourse; Poetry; *Popular Culture; Student Motivation; Urban Culture
IDENTIFIERS African Americans; Oral Tradition; *Rap Music; Rhetorical Stance

ABSTRACT

As an extension of African-Americans' rich language and musical heritage and abilities, rap music has some value in the educational setting. Rap music started as a dance fad beginning in the mid-1970s among Blacks and Hispanics in New York's outer boroughs. It is another generational brand of Black language and musical usage and an extension of Black verbal and rhetorical strategies. Rap offers a series of precepts to live by and a way to understand and deconstruct the language which oppresses its listeners. Since rap songs or lyrics are intended to be spoken and not sung, they have great value as a unique form of poetry. Educators have commented on the finer points of rapping and rap music and see its value in the classroom because of its outstanding stylistic makeup. Because of its focus on presenting a message, rap has become a forceful mechanism that can be useful in the instruction of America's youth. Some of the ways rap can be used in the classroom include: (1) select, play, listen to and view, and discuss the contents or messages of rap music with a positive message; (2) have students write and present raps about aspects of particular classroom lessons; (3) create rap lecture notes on history and science; and (4) see how raps are used effectively in television or radio commercials. Teachers should use rap music occasionally to motivate and instruct, not as an everyday teaching tool. (Twenty-seven references are attached.) (RS)

POSITIVE USE OF RAP MUSIC IN THE CLASSROOM

Edward Anderson
John Tyler Community College
Chester, Virginia

INTRODUCTION

In an article in Ebony, Charles Whitaker has commented on the popularity of rap or rapping or rap music or hip-hop: "More than a decade ago, when young inner-city street poets first set their brand of provocative talk-sung lyrics to the driving beat of drum machines and the scratches of needles across records, skeptics predicted a quick and painful demise of the new music. They were wrong. Today, rap or hip-hop as its practitioners prefer is a persuasive presence in popular culture, informing not only America's musical tastes, but its fashion trends and vernacular as well." He further comments, "telling signs of rap's influence are evident everywhere....rap is used to comment benignly on the human condition" (34).

However popular rap may be, "it has come under intense fire since their rappers releases with liberal doses of four-letter words....speak directly and passionately to a generation of angry youths" (Whitaker, 34).

Yet, many people who criticize rapping or rap music do not understand rap's culture or the climate that it comes from. Whitaker says that "rap's defenders say much of the criticism stems from a generational gulf that prevents many older listeners from getting close enough to the music to understand its appeal" (36). Yet, rap music seems to be quite popular among America's youths--both black and white--in their teens and early twenties. A test of its popularity is the increase in record sales. Although it might seem that rap music only gives a negative message, there are growing numbers of rappers who are making rap music more socially responsible.

In relationship to the worth or value of rap music, Whitaker states that "in all forms, it reflects the movement and views of today's youth....It is a form of social commentary that's not different from cultural expressions that come from other generations of Black people" (39).

Hence, if rap music has such a cultural and social appeal and value, why can it not have an equally educational value in the classroom? Further, innovative educators are asking the question, "Could students learn more if taught with rap music?" Dr. Houston A. Baker, Jr., an English professor at the University of Pennsylvania, thinks young students could learn more if taught with rap music (Waldron, 16). He further believes "rap music can be used to help student appreciate classic literature, ethics, politics, philosophy and other areas of study" (16).

HISTORY OR BACKGROUND OF RAPPING OR RAP MUSIC

Rap music started as a dance fad beginning in the mid-1970's among black and Hispanics in New York's outer boroughs--Bronx, Harlem and Brooklyn. It combines the disco beat with breakdancing, graffiti art and rap. In relating rap music's history, Donald Clarke says that "disco became boring to kids in the street who couldn't afford to dance in swanky clubs anyway; they played with harder funky black pop music that disco had come from, cutting back and forth between copies of the same record (such as James Brown's 'Get On the Good Foot'), making their own 'mixes' of the music, called breakdancing. When MCs added rapping over the music (chanted street poetry which was improvised at first....) it became rap, also called hip-hop (Lovebug Starsky used the words 'to the hip, hop hippedy hop.'"

"Rapper's Delight" in 1979 became the first produced rap hit on Sugar Hill by a Bronx group called the Sugar Hill Gang. Other influential early rap productions were "Planet Rock" in 1982 by Afrika Bambaataa and his Soul Sonic Force. Grandmaster Flash was among the first to make a record and added sound effects and produced rhythmic fills (by "scratching" the stylus in the grove). In 1980 Kurt Harlem and the Bronx whose real name is Kurt Walker made the

chants with the fast talking disk entitled "The Breaks."

Among the more popular rappers there are Grandmaster Flash & the Furious Fice ("Grandmaster Flash on the Wheels of Steel"), The Treacherous Three ("Body Rock"), and the female trio called Sequence ("The Monster Jam").

Rap is nothing new. For David Toop in Rap Attack relates its long history: "Rap's forbearers stretch back through disco, street funk, radio DJs, Bo Diddley, the BeBop Singers, Cab Calloway, Pigmeat Markham, the tap dancers, and comics, the Last Poets, Gil-Scott-Heron, Muhammad Ali, acappella and doo-woop groups, ring games, skip-rope rhymes, prison and army songs, toasts, signifying and the dozens, all the way to the **griots of Nigeria and Gambia" (Toop, 19).

DEFINITION STYLE OF RAP MUSIC

Black Americans have developed from West Africa and later in America unique and distinct styles of language and musical ability through the years. Rap music is, hence, another generational brand of this language and musical usage. It is also an extension of the black verbal and rhetorical strategies which enjoy "an exceptionally rich and varied terminological system, including such folk concepts as 'sounding,' 'signifying,' 'rapping.' 'running it down,' 'shucking,' 'jiving,' 'marking,'....different modes of achieving particular communicative ends," (Gumprez, 186). These verbal strategies testify to the importance that African-Americans assign to verbal art which is used mainly for survival in the ghetto.

Rap music or rapping or hip-hop falls into two distinct categories of usage by blacks: a unique black language style and a unique black musical style. The "rap" component comes from

the use of one of the forementioned black American verbal and rhetorical strategies--rapping which is defined in the following way by Roger D. Abrahams and Geneva Gay: "Rapping is one of those terms which has been borrowed from Blacks and has achieved wide currency among whites, who use it to describe a fluent, interesting, and engaging conversation....A rap is not usually involved with factual commentary. Instead, it is a sales pitch with the rapper advertising the goods he has to offer. It is given and received not on the authenticity of the factual content but on how convincingly the pitch is delivered" (202). Stylisticaliy, rapping or rap music is a form of black American popular music consisting of improvised rhymes performed to a rhythmic accompaniment. A classic rap requires an original use of slang, unusual and unexpected rhymes and strong visual imagery.

The "music" component of rap music comes from a distinct and unique style of black music which was created in New York City about the mid-1970s (known as hip-hop). As a distinctive black American musical genre, rapping or rap music or hip-hop has many antecedents, "African chanting, spoken blues, the patter of disc jockeys, the spoken interpolations in the performance of James Brown and other early soul and funk singers, and the taunting rhymes of the boxer Muhammad Ali" (New Grove Dictionary of American Music, 10). Rapping or rap music also comes from "toasting," a technique originated by Jamaican disc jockeys which entails the recitation of doggerals over prerecorded rhythmic parts.

Hence, rap music is a style of delivery in which the performers do not sing but talk rapidly over a rudimentary musical background. It is the use of rhythmic street slang delivered at breakneck speed.

THEMES/MESSAGES OF RAP MUSIC

Rap music has its roots and sources in the ghetto of the inner cities. Yet, the music not only meet the needs of black urban America, but it serves important issues of the mainstream, such as upper middle-class diverse musical genre traditions of country/western, 60s bubble gum rock, German electronic pop music....(Dixon, 230).

This music was created when "most rappers used pre-existing recordings, usually by other artists, as the jumping-off point for their own art. These records were played forward and background at varying speeds or 'scratched' to create an incoherent jumble of sound out of which a rap of melody or a single oft-repeated phrase might grab the listener's attention" (Dixon, 231). The words of the music are not sung, but they are shouted or hurled at the audience almost as a dare to action. Hence, "the word" within the context of rap music means "truth". That which is being said can be depended upon as fact.

Rap offers a series of precepts to live by and a way to understand and deconstruct the language which oppresses its listeners. The lyrics of much rap music serves as a call for self-reliance, black pride and self-determination. The music raps shows an interest in black cultural heritage; its social conscience is directed toward the poor, the disenfranchised, and the marginal throwaways.

The lyrics of rap music may be seen as a part of Black Art which Genera Smitherman believes "must of necessity be functional and relevant to the lives and daily struggles of black people" as the ultimate power of the rap (259).

In the black community, emphasis is placed upon the ability to use verbal skills orally through rapping and the other black verbal and rhetorical strategies. Rap music thus shows

aspects of the black American experience "in which verbal performance becomes both a means of establishing one's reputation and a teaching/socialization force. Black raps are highly stylized, dramatic and spectacular; speakers and raps are conveyors of information" (Smitherman, 263).

Rap relies on mass media techniques and technologies; it also derives much of its content and imagery from mass culture. Therefore, television shows, sports personalities, arcade games, and familiar name-brand commercial products are often referred to in the lyrics and their musical themes or jingles are sometimes sampled. Shustermaker makes the following assertion: "One very prominent theme of hip hop is how the advertised ideal of conspicuous consumption--luxury cars, clothes, and high tech appliances--lures many ghetto youth to a life of crime, a life which promises the quick attainment of such commodities but typically ends in death, jail, or destitution, thus, reinforcing the ghetto cycle of poverty and despair (623-4).

Rap music is devoted to raising black political consciousness, pride, and revolutionary impulses. Still other raps serve as street-smart moral fables offering cautionary narratives and practical advise on problems of crime, drugs, and sexual hygiene (for example, Ice-t's "Drama" and "High Rollers," Kool Moe Dee's "Monster Crack" and "Go See the Doctor," BDP's "Stop the Violence," and "Jimmy)". Finally, groups of rappers consist of many chanters who take turns improvising on themes such as exhortations to the misery in urban decay. These rappers very often chant a refrain in union but they rarely break into a song. Disc jockeys who play recordings provide the musical background against which rap is preformed.

VALUES/APPRECIATION OF RAP MUSIC

Since rap songs or lyrics are intended to be spoken and not sung, they have great value as

a unique form of poetry. Shusterman takes note: "The lyrics seem to be crude and simple-minded, the diction substandard, the rhymes, raucous, repetitive, and frequently raunchy. Yet....these same lyrics claim and extol rap's status as poetry and fine art." (613).

First, rap music derives from selecting and combining parts of prerecorded songs to produce a "new soundtrack". This soundtrack which is produced by the disc jockey on a multiple turntable constitutes the musical background for the rap lyrics.

Shusterman further extols the lyrics of rap music which come from the verbal virtuosity of black Americans: "Failure to recognize the traditional tropes, stylistic conventions, and constraint-produced complexities of Afro-American English (such as semantic inversion and indirection, feigned simplicity, and convert parody--) has induced the false belief that all rap lyrics are superficial and monotonous if not altogether moronic. But informed and sympathic close reading will reveal in many rap songs not only the cleverly potent vernacular expression of keen insights but also forms of linguistic subtlety and multiple levels of meaning whose polysomic complexity, and ambiguity and intertextuality can sometimes rival that of high art's so-called 'open work'" (615).

Next, the dominate beat of rap boasting language can be traced back from African roots to jungle rhythms which were taken up by rock and disco and then reappropriated by rap disc jockeys. Although there is an African heritage for rap music, it was early born in the disco era of the mid-1970's in the ghettoes of New York City. Rap music undermined and transformed the appropriated disco sounds and techniques. In contrast to jazz, hip-hop or rap music did not take mere melodies or musical phrases. It instead lifted concrete sound-events, prerecorded token performances of such musical patterns, by manipulating recording equipment--cutting and

blending one record into the next, matching tempos to make a smooth transition without violently disrupting the flow of dancing. Thus, hip-hop began explicitly as dance music to be appreciated through movement, not mere listening.

Rap music was originally designated for a live audience at dances held in homes, schools, community centers and parks. It was performed where one could admire the dexterity of the DJ and the personality and improvisation skills of the rappers. It was not at first intended for a mass audience. "Rapper's Delight" in 1979 was the first radio broadcast and release of a rap music production. When groups moved from the street to the studio, the disc jockey's role of appropriating was not generally abandoned and continued to be thematized in rap lyrics as central to the art.

To show the blending of language and music, rap music further developed from the basic techniques of cutting between sampled records....It developed from three other formal devices which contribute significantly to its sound and aesthetic. "Scratching" is the overlaying or mixing of certain sounds from one record to those of another already playing. Punch phrasing is a refinement of such mixing, where the drum moves the needle back and forth over a specific phrase of chords or slaps of a record to add a powerful percussive effect to the sound of the other record playing all the while on the other turntable. Simple scratching is a device in which there is a wilder and more rapid back and forth catching of the records too fast for the recorded music to be recognized but productive of a dramatic scratching sound which has its own intense musical quality and crazed beat.

Within rap music there is a display of a variety of appropriate content. Shusterman says, "not only does it sample from a wide rage of popular songs, it feeds on classical music, TV

theme songs, advertising jingles, and electronic music of arcade games. It even appropriates nonmusical constant, such as media news reports and fragments of speeches by Malcolm X and Martin Luther King." (617). He further suggests the themes of rap music:" While it typically avoids excluding white society (and white artists), rap focuses on features of ghetto life that whites and middle-class blacks would rather ignore: pimping, prostitution, and drug addiction, as well as rampant venereal diseases, street killings, and oppressive harassment by white policemen" (619).

USE IN THE CLASSROOM

Many middle-class instructors might ask the question, "How then can rap music or rapping and hip hop be used in the classroom?" Richard Shusterman, the author of the article "The Fine Art of Rap," assures us that "rap has been used effectively to teach writing and reading skills and black history in the ghetto classroom" (626). He comments on the finer points of rapping and rap music and sees its value in the classroom because of its outstanding stylistic makeup.

Because of the importance of presenting a message--both positive and often negative--rap has become a forceful mechanism that can be useful in the instruction of America's youths. In Rap Attack Tony Van Der Meer comments on the use of the positive message that rap has for the classroom: "One of the most interesting, progressive and positive trends occurring in hip hop is the rap message. When considering the high, broad youth audience that hip hop appeals to, rap messages are a powerful and captivating art that has the ability to make young people conscious of the nature, conditions, and kinds of national and international problems that

exist"(Toop, Introduction). Further, Van Der Meer says that " a teacher in a predominantly Black and Hispanic school uses rap to teach her class. According to her, the enthusiasm, motivation and ability of her students to express themselves when taught in this way is remarkable. The students in her class have become more open and less shy when learning how to read and write their own rap songs" (Toop, Introduction).

As used in the classroom, rap can make the use of Black English more acceptable. Van Der meer says that "in hip hop culture, Black English is the language of verbal expression, spoken within the context that reflects the pain and struggles of Black life in the United States. Now it's relevant and hip and most of all commercially acceptable" (Toop, Introduction).

The messages of rap music can and have reached the entire young population. Van Der Meer asserts: "Now that hip hop has gained the attention of such a huge, broad youth audience, white popular culture is moving to copy it. As poor and alienated white youth hear and see something they can relate to on their own terms. without stripping it bare of feeling and content, white entrepreneurs see something they can make money out," (Toop, Introduction). Therefore, rapping or rap music can be an effective teaching tool for motivation and instruction of young people. Because they could relate to the rap singers and their comments and commerce (sneakers, etc.), these young people have used it in their daily education. In Rap Attack David Toop tells how in the 1970s Gary Bryd developed "a social program researching literary and taking presentations into schools in New York and New Jersey" (45). In 1979 he started work on a rap called " The Crown" about the black heritage from Egypt to West Africa to Malcolm X, Langston Hughes, Ali, Ella and Joe Louis. He later used rap to improve reading levels.

Useful raps for educational purposes surfaced on Stevie Wonder's "Black Man" from the Songs in the Key of Life album. The last part of the song is a question and answer, call and response session from the Al Fann Theatrical Ensemble in Harlem with Gary Byrd as one of the teachers. In late 1971 James Brown's "Get Up,Get Into It, Get Involved" gave a general message: " A positive exhortation not to waste your life or be manipulated by others, was part of a series of records which encouraged black youth to stay in school, avoid succumbing to hard drugs, and be proud of the color of their skin" (Toop, Introduction).

Further, about teaching through the use of rap music, Dr. Houston Baker, director of the Center for the Study of Black Literature and Culture at the University of Pennsylvania, says that " any English teacher who has not attended a popular music concert or set in front of MT for a couple of hours isn't fit to teach" (Waldron, 16). He further points out that "some of the rap artist actually record instructional rap music and if a teacher wants to introduce them (students) to Shakespeare or to Homer or to Plato, you've got to start where they are" (Waldron, 16).

Patricia Pike, a Chicago teacher at the McDaade Elementary Schools agrees with Dr. Baker that rap can be included in the curriculum. For she says, " The rhythm-rhyme format combined with the music of the eighties really speaks to them (students)" and "I believe in order to teach someone you must first have their attention. And if rap music has their attention, then we should use that medium to teach them" (Waldron, 17). She has released a recording of educational raps for youths in the classroom.

Baker does not believe that the instructors should stop teaching Western culture, but they should include, whenever possible, rap music in the curriculum and, hence, recognize today's youth culture. For he says that youths are greatly influenced and taught by today's music and

mass media in general.

If the above statements are true, then teachers should begin to use rap, rap music, or hip hop in the classroom. Some of the ways this can be done to motivate and instruct students are as follows:

1. Select, play, listen to and view, and discuss the contents or messages of videos of rap music that give a positive message.

2. Have students (with ability) write raps (lyrics without the music) about aspects of certain portions of a particular lesson in reading, history, politics and writing.

3. Have students present to the class original raps that they have created based upon certain elements in particular lessons.

4. Create rap lecture notes (with music) on history and science. Use rap music and lyrics to motivate students about a lesson that may follow. Teacher and students (with ability) give performances of original raps.

5. See how raps (lyrics) are used effectively in television or radio commercials.

Teachers should use rap music occasionally to motivate and instruct, not as an everyday teaching tool and setting but where it fits into the learning and educational experience.

CONCLUSION

The use of rap music in the classroom is not for everyone--students and teachers alike, but only for those who can profit by the motivation and instruction it might give. As an extension of African-Americans' rich language and musical heritage and abilities, surely rap

music has some value in the educational setting. Those instructors who are innovative are encouraged to try using it in the class room (if they have not already done so). Because of its popularity among America's youth and its value as a unique form of poetry and music, rap music can have value in the classroom. Shusterman enumerates outstanding aesthetic raps when he says, "There are countless other raps which emphatically declare rap's poetic and artistic status, among the more forceful are Stetsasonic's "Talkin All that Jazz," BDP's "I'm Still #1," "Ya Slipping," "Ghetto Music," "Hip Hop Rules," and "Kool Moe Dee's "The Best" (629).

The advertisement of the teaching video in the Filmakers Library in New York City presents its 29 minute video "Straight Up Rappin" produced by Tana Ross and Freke Vuijst in the following manner: "This compelling documentary is about rap as it is declaimed in the streets of New York, straight up--without music. These rappers, amateurs all, feel a compelling need to express their feelings about the world they live in. There are ten-year-olds who rap about the Bill of Rights, young men who rap about homelessness and child abuse, a young woman who raps about revolution. Listening to the powerful and often bitter words of their outspoken street poetry, one is hearing the political consciousness of this disenfranchised generation."

In a Newsweek article "The Lowdown on Hip-Hop: Kids Talk About the Music," twelve interviewed students tell how much they still admire rap music which could still be used to properly instruct them. These students still admire rap inspite of some negative messages that have been sent to America through it. Each individual rapper or rap group (both black and white has its own individual agenda which is not for the consumption of everyone and which does not always portray negative moral messages. Before instructors dismiss rap music, they should listen to it to attempt to learn from it and to understand something about its possible effectiveness. Rap

music has already been successfully used in the classroom. Therefore, all students can profit by its educational usage.

WORKS CITED

Abrahams, Roger D. and Geneva Gay. "Black Culture in the Classroom." Language and Cultural Diversity in Amerian Education. Ed. Roger D. Abrahams and Rudolph C. Troike. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1972.

_____. Deep Down in the Jungle. Chicago. Aldine Publishing Company, 1970.

_____. Positively Black. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall., 1969.

_____. Talking Black. Rowley Mass.: Newbury House Publishers, Inc., 1976.

_____. "Talking Black in the Classroom." Language and Cultural Diversity in American Education. Ed. Roger D. Abrahams and Rudolph C. Troike. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1972.

Baugh, John. Black Street Speech. Austin: The University of Texas Press, 1972.

"Black Language and Culture: Implications for Education." Special Issue of the Florida FL Reporter. Chicago: Quandrangle Books, 1968.

Clarke, Donald. The Penguin Encyclopedia of Popular Music. Viking: New York, 1989.

Dillard, J.L. Lexicon of Black English. New York: The Seabury Press, 1977.

Dixon, Wheeler Winston. "Urban Black American Music in the Late 1980's: The 'Word' as Cultural Signifier." The Midwest Quarterly 30 Winter 1989:22-41.

Gates, David. "Decoding Rap Music." Newsweek 115 March 1990:60-62.

Gumpez, John J. "Verbal Strategies in Multilingual Communication." Language and Cultural Diversity in American Education. Ed. Roger D. Abrahams and Rudolph C. Rroike. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1972.

Hager, Steven. Hip-Hop--The Illustrated History of Break Dancing. Rap Music and Graffitti. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1984.

Hitchcock, H. Wiley and Stanley Sadie. The New Grove Dictionary of American Music. New York: Grove Dictionary of Music., 1986.

Kochman, Thams. "Culture and Communication: Implications for Black English In the Classroom." Florida FL Reporter (Spring-Summer 1969).

_____. Rappin' and Stylin' Out: Communications in Urban Black America. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1972.

_____. "'Rappin' in the Black Ghetto." Trans-action. February 1969.

"The Lowdown on Hip-Hop: Kids Talk About the Music." Newsweek, 119. June 1992:50-51.

Marlowe, Ann. "Undertone: On Rap Hermeneutics." Artforum 30 March 1992.

McKinney, R.E. "What's Behind the Rise of Rap?" Ebony 44 January 1989: 60+.

Sadie, Stanley. Ed. The Norton/Grove Concise Encyclopedia of Music. New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1988.

Samuels, David. "The Rap on Rap." The New Republic 285 November 11, 1991: 24-26.

Shaw, Arnolad. Dictionary of American Popular Rock. New York: Schirmer Books, 1982.

Shusterman, Richard. "The Fine Art of Rap:" New Literary History. 222 Summer 1991: 613-632.

Smitherman, Geneva. "The Power of the Rap: The Black Idiom and the New Black Poetry." 20th Century Literature. Oct. 1973L 259-274.

Toop, David. The Rap Attack-African Jive to New York Hip Hop. Boston, MA: South End Press, 1984.

Waldron, Clarence. "Could Students Learn More If Taught with Rap Music?" Jet 77 January 29, 1990: 16-18.

Whitaker, Charles. "The Real Story Behind the Rap Revolution." Ebony 45 June 1990:34.