

The use of music to teach life skills to students with emotional disabilities in the classroom*

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Abstract: This article discusses the teaching of life skills to urban American youths who are highly fascinated with the hip-hop culture—songs, raps, miming, lyrics, dressing and musical rhythms, especially individuals with emotional disabilities in the public schools. This is an instructional curriculum strategy to encourage positive and active participation of these students, promote perfect school attendance, encourage good behaviors, deal with anger management and motivate committed learning in the classroom. The instructors' understanding of students' culture, learning needs and styles, and using such background knowledge to educate them become imperative in this setting. These urge for innovative and leadership projects in the author's special education classroom necessitated the application of hip-hop music to teach life skills, reading and other functional skills in the classroom. The outcome was positive and rewarding to both the teachers and students. There are recommendations for interested teachers to devise creative teaching methods, differentiated instruction and appropriate classroom management practices to attain student achievement.

Key words: music; hip-hop culture; America; public schools; education; life skills; emotional disability

1. Introduction

There is a strong need for educators to use multiple culturally responsive teaching techniques to engage a diverse population of exceptional students in active learning that promotes self-advocacy and educational performance. Achieving success in the inner city schools requires creative classroom approaches and instructional strategies by general subject specialists and special education teachers to meet the growing influence of hip-hop culture on urban youths, especially males.

Teaching techniques like team teaching, differentiated instruction, task analysis, and cooperative learning activities have great inputs in effective teaching-learning process but the success of these teaching methods are being threatened by the influence of the hip-hop culture. Every given period in the classroom, the inner city child is engaged in some hip-hop culture thoughts, debate or act with his or her peers, which have huge potentials for class lesson disruptions.

Marian Wright Edelman of the Children's Defense Fund as cited in Wynn (2006) and Clay (2006) revealed that every 5 seconds during the school day, a ... public school student is suspended. Every 46 seconds during the school day, a ... high school student drops out. ... According to Brown (2006), they suffer from a cultural

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disconnect in schools and classrooms. Clay added that they are infatuated with hip-hop music displaying sometimes—bizarre dressing and clothing styles, flashy jewelry, earrings, cornrows, brash language, body piercing and tattoos.

This attitude affects classroom participation and performance in our public schools. The hip-hop culture is equally influencing students from other cultures (Europe, Africa, Asia, Australia, Scandinavia, Latin American societies, etc.) and this becomes a challenge to public school teachers to understand their needs and learning styles, and expose them to a wide range of creative, personal, intellectual and artistic development opportunities in the classroom.

After attending a professional development workshop for general educators in 2006, which covered issues on classroom management and student achievement, this author, was motivated to experiment on an unconventional teaching strategy. Within the 2006-2007 School Year, the author designed innovative instructional techniques to support students' understanding of functional life skills, self-determination, social skills, and overall success in a typical special education classroom. The author promoted experiential learning and active classroom participation using hip-hop music—lyrics, instrumentals, videos and CDs. The process was challenging but it managed successfully the behaviors of a selection of middle school students at Dorchester county public schools in Cambridge, Maryland. For classroom instruction purposes, the author redesigned the hip-hop songs, lyrics and presented attitudes of some American artistes, utilizing their music instrumentals in selected class lessons to fit into special life skills topics. In the process, the students embarked on a variety of activities—For instance, examined the artistes' talent and creative skills, business interests and investment acumen, public behaviors and the impact or implications of the roles of such hip-hop artistes in society. These artistes include 50Cent, Eminem, Kanye West, Fat Joe, Kid Rock, country singer Kenny Chesney, African superstar Akon, Mary J. Blige, Britney Spears, Ludacris, Westlife, Michael Jackson, rock groups like Linkin Park, Cold Play, Creed, among other performers.

Over the period of one school year, the author worked with his students in the Emotionally Challenged Program on Life Skills, as well as created opportunities for acquiring reading, math, writing and social skills. The various class lessons profiled different hip-hop artists and music, examined their lyrics and changed some of the songs to reflect positive messages, with support from internet-generated instrumental rhythms to the delight of the class. The students recited the poetic lines from the songs, read aloud the word syllables, and wrote brief constructed responses (BCRs), essays, critiques and reflections on the life of these artistes, their messages and the implications to the society. Furthermore, students worked independently and in groups to identify the main/supporting ideas in the music project, provide alternative statements for the negative words and letters contained in the lyrics, as well as participate in related group projects, book reports, class presentations, individual hip-hop music compositions, etc. The students were equally encouraged to design posters, display their creative sides in the area of fine arts and CD cover designs—drawings, paintings, poetry and general math computation skills (for example, addition of an artiste earnings per annum, number of hits on Billboard Charts, etc.).

The experimental outcomes were as follows:

(1) It turned out to be a bold approach to the understanding of cognitive development theory of learning. The author challenged his students to write, discuss and present hip-hop songs about aspects of some functional math computation problems. These students learned the same thing at the same level a year earlier, and they exhibited better understanding of the problems. Calculations on concerts tickets sold, merchandise sales, investments, profits and number of CDs sold formed part of the math solutions. (2) In the area of knowledge management,

hip-hop songs focus on presenting a message; thus, they have become forceful mechanisms, and useful in the instruction of students from all races, for example, the African-American youths, Caucasians, Latinos, and other immigrants. Classroom discussions, debates and quizzes on the positive and negative effects of the artist lyrics occur during the life skill lessons. (3) The classroom becomes more exciting with active classroom participation and student commitment. Hip-hop involves personal expressions, commentaries and spoken words than sung, and has unique value as forms of participatory poetry for different students. There are successes in the development of students' interest in reading and writing skills—They are engaged in all kinds of reading artist biographies, book reports and musical projects. (4) There is reduced school absenteeism because students become motivated to come to class in anticipation of a fun activity.

2. The issue

The significance of public education lies in the ability of teachers to provide teaching-learning services in the classroom based on curriculum content that inspire, challenge, uplift and prepare students to acquire the abilities and skills to cope with the daily demands of the environment they live in. Today's public schools are highly diverse in nature with prominent cultural phenomenon exhibited by every young student at school and at home; thanks to the influence of the technology, the mass media and industrial development trends, which this author calls "the hip-hop millennium generation culture". This cultural phenomenon has a toll effect on the daily activities and lifestyles of our young people in the society, on their parents and families, as well as on the public schools, to the extent that students' academic performance and school achievements have influences from the hip-hop culture.

The influence manifests in their physical fashion statements, practical sophistication and different attitudes: For instance, the way young boys and girls in our metropolitan cities dress, talk, laugh, eat, smoke, drink or study could be a reflection of the hip-hop culture—from the kind of music they play, listen to, and dance to; and overall behavior in public. These attitudes have negative and positive effects to the lives of the individual, and all the people around him or her, like the siblings, parents, teachers, the law enforcement agents and the school system.

Therefore, the American society is challenge in the public schools where the teaching-learning process and strategies of imparting knowledge are concerned. These concerns emanate because there are series of behavior problems and very poor student performances in reading, writing and social skills assessments in different public schools. So many school districts risk losing government subsidies for not meeting Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) standards because of students' low test scores on state assessments and placement tests. This scenario is not acceptable to the US "No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act" which demands student and teacher accountability, proficiency, high academic achievement, and the schools meeting adequate yearly progress (AYP) on state assessments even though Education Secretary Spellings believes NCLB is working (Yudof & Ruberg, 2007).

2.1 What is emotional/behavioral disability

A student with emotional disorder is not able to learn successfully in the inclusion classroom without some special provisions from the special education teacher. According to the American Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), several factors may contribute to the inability of the student to learn. For example, (1) It cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory, or health factors; (2) An inability to build or maintain satisfactory relationships with peers and teachers; (3) Inappropriate types of behavior or feelings under normal circumstances; (4) A general pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression; or (5) a tendency to develop physical symptoms or

fears associated with personal or school problems. In addition, the term does not include children who are socially maladjusted, unless it is determined that they are seriously emotionally disturbed (Hardman, et al., 2008, p. 229).

2.2 What is hip-hop culture

With “culture” being a way of peoples’ lives, Hodge (2008) believes the hip-hop culture has consumed many American youths, which is difficult to define but with some descriptors, one can understand its nature and modus operandi. Notable African American hip-hop artiste, KRS-ONE, views it as a term that describes an ever growing inner city in which people’s independent collective consciousness could be expressed through such elements as “Breakin, Emceein, Graffiti Art, Deejayin, Beatboxin, Street Fashion, Street Language, Street Knowledge and Street Entrepreneurialism ... ” (KRS-ONE, 2007). Although the artiste argues that hip-hop is not just a collection of music and dance products, but also the collective consciousness of a real community that has transcended across youths of diverse cultures who attend American public schools, and affects their classroom behaviors and academic performance.

The Hip-Hop Thesaurus dictionary (2007) argues that hip-hop music and culture is extremely powerful with global socioeconomic reach today, adding: Hip-hop music is a form of popular music today that originated from the Bronx and New York in the early 1970’s. The music form originally consisted of rapping and DJing and then evolved to include collaborations with other popular types of music. Hip-hop music originated by providing inner city African American and Latino youth with an important voice for describing the challenges that affected ever day life in the United States ghettos. Break-dancing and graffiti made up the other components of hip-hop culture. Hip-hop music now represents a voice for urban youth and has become an economic powerhouse throughout the world today. It becomes a way of life for some urban youths, and displays in public places, schools and homes in a variety of ways, sometimes, responsible attitudes or weird individual exhibits in the form of expressions.

Turnquist (2006) added these views on hip-hop culture while arguing that it has transformed pop culture—and vice versa:

When it first boomed out of New York’s South Bronx more than 25 years ago, hip-hop was bare-bones but expressive, made by young men too broke to buy instruments. With turntables, microphones and words, they made music that, at its best, spoke out against poverty and injustice. Early milestones such as Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five’s “The Message” and Public Enemy’s “It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold US Back” established rap as a new form of protest art But now, with a few exceptions, mainstream hip-hop is more party than politics, defined by videos featuring artists rapping about their cars, their jewelry and their booty-shaking women—the all-American materialism of Madison Avenue.

This is where our youths are involved in the display of sometimes weird lifestyles, attaching little or less importance to their education. In most cases, black males are more entrenched in this hip-hop culture than any other racial groups in America, evidenced by the rap tunes, rhyme and rhythm, plus the creative exhibits.

3. Why focus on public school students? Why black males?

There are some interesting arguments on the social and academic problems facing black students whether in a regular or a special classroom, as presented in this discussion. According to Wynn (2005), black children are labeled mentally retarded nearly 300 percent more than white children and only 8.4 percent of black males are identified and enrolled in gifted and talented classes.

As evidenced by data contained in the National Center for Education Statistics report: Educational Achievement and Black-White Inequality—There is no doubt about the problems and something needs to be done

about it (Wynn, 2005), especially if we intend to achieve standard student enrollment and retention in the public schools, promote quality student learning outcomes and high graduation rates.

3.1 Discipline, special education, and jail issues of black males in America

Wynn (2005) presented alarming information concerning the conditions of black American males and students:

(1) Black students, while representing only 17 percent of public school students, account for 32 percent of suspensions and 30 percent of expulsions. In 1999, 35 percent of all black students in grades 7-12 had been suspended or expelled from school. The rate was 20 percent for Hispanics and 15 percent for whites.

(2) Black children are labeled “mentally retarded”, nearly 300 percent more than white children and only 8.4 percent of Black males are identified and enrolled in gifted and talented classes.

(3) Black males in their early 30s are twice as likely to have prison records (22 percent) than bachelor’s degrees (12 percent).

(4) A black male born in 1991 (today’s middle school student) has a 29 percent chance of spending time in prison at some point in his life. The figure for Hispanic males is 16 percent, and for white males is 4 percent.

3.2 High schools performance

(1) Only 30 percent of black high school students take advanced mathematics courses;

(2) Only 27 percent of black high school students take advanced English;

(3) Only 12 percent of black high school students take science classes as high as chemistry and physics;

(4) Only 5 percent of black high school students take a fourth year of a foreign language with only 2 percent taking an AP foreign language course;

(5) Black students take AP exams at a rate of 53 per 1,000 students. The rate for Hispanic students is 115 per 1,000 and for Whites it is 185 per 1,000;

(6) The average ACT score for black students is 16.9; for whites it is nearly 30 percent higher at 21.8 percent (Wynn, 2005).

Student in the public school especially in the inner city schools with large black student population, Caucasians, Hispanics and other diverse groups has embraced the hip-hop culture in different spheres of life. There is the gangster rap influence emanating from the hip-hop culture, perpetuated by hip-hop artistes, and emulated by teenagers from diverse populations, which is now permeating our inner city streets, schools and homes.

Wynn argues that enabling and empowering inner city youths or students requires what he called “a few missing bricks” (mission, vision, climate and culture, curriculum and content, instruction, and focus, and direction). This has made positive school performance among certain races difficult. For example, just over 50 percent of our African American students are graduating from high school across America (Roberson, 2006).

Therefore, public schools especially administrators, parents and classroom teachers, need to intervene in their education; including students with emotional disability. The instructors need to be equipped with teaching strategies, support services and preventive programs, and engaging school activities that would elicit success and academic achievement in our inner city schools. Slavin, et al (1994) justified teachers’ capability of providing such instructional delivery support and services in the schools when referred to Ron Edwards, a notable student empowerment advocate who said, “We can, whenever and wherever we choose, successfully teach all children whose schooling is of interest to us. We already know more than we need in order to do this. Whether we do it must finally depend on how we feel about the fact that we have not so far”. This proposition according to Slavin,

et al has two parts: One is the assertion that every child can learn; the other, that we have the knowledge we need to create schools in which every child will learn (irrespective of their disabilities).

3.3 What every classroom teacher should know

For public school teachers to become successful in their respective classrooms, classroom teachers have to be conversant with the youths' hip-hop lifestyles—For example, the cultural and socioeconomic issues confronting them, their families, neighborhood, attitudes and ambitions. Wynn (2005) stressed that their achievement will require a systematic and sustained collaboration between adults throughout the school community. He encouraged classroom teachers to understand the needs of parents, learning styles of children, and have a genuine desire to ensure frequent opportunities for the students to be successful in their classrooms. This includes understanding the disabilities of the students in special education programs. In addition, Wynn recommended the following:

- (1) Challenge and expose inner city males to a wide range of personal, intellectual and artistic development opportunities;
- (2) Nurture, develop and celebrate the many and diverse gifts of inner city children through differentiated instruction or other instructional strategies/programs;
- (3) Failure to establish effective home-school collaboration with shared beliefs, goals, and expectations will most certainly result in classroom disruptions and underachievement;
- (4) Parents will have to become actively involved in the academic, social, spiritual and physical development of their sons and provide a household culture built around a set of spiritual core values which encourage and celebrate excellence. (Wynn, 2005)

In line with the information concerning black males in the public schools, teachers have significant tasks to promote effective classroom communication, interaction and relationship with the students. Teachers must recognize those disturbing issues that they face daily in the classroom. Accordingly, Clay (2006) implored American public school teachers to recognize that:

- (1) Every student has different characteristics and some black males may not be the same as other classmates;
- (2) Some students in middle and high schools do not process information quickly;
- (3) They may delay in preparing for tests and quizzes;
- (4) They may need more warm-up time for class participation;
- (5) They may not always be prepared for class;
- (6) They do not always have books and required materials;
- (7) They may frequently forget homework; and
- (8) They may hardly make note of project due dates. These characteristics are applicable to different students across the globe.

This means, teachers have several problems during the teaching-learning transaction in subjects like reading, mathematics, science, language arts, writing, functional life skills, vocational training, etc. During the author's first year, as a special education teacher in the public schools in the United States, he found it quite challenging to adjust to the attitudes of the inner city students in the classroom. He had started his teaching career in one of the "at-risk" public schools in Baltimore city, Maryland, where majority of the students in their emotionally disturbed program classroom were from "group homes" and "dysfunctional families". This was the special education classroom for grade 9 students with emotional and behavioral disorders. By the time the author left the high school and relocated to the Eastern Shore of Maryland, he had gathered significant experience in different areas of inner city students' hip-hop cultural displays in the classroom. After participating in an in-service course that dealt on hip-hop issues surrounding black males and students' from diverse cultures and learning, he embarked on further research to identify the best ways to manage his special education classroom for higher student achievement. This was where the practical application of hip-hop culture in the classroom emerged. It was because his students always showed great admiration and enthusiasm for creative ideas, periodic musical stunts in the classroom (which could be disruptive if not controlled) and lessons that involve hip-hop culture. In other

words, the onus lies on the teacher to be creative, flexible and cash on students' readiness to discover new things in the classroom and introduce meaningful teaching-learning process.

3.4 The teaching-learning task

The teaching process could be effective or ineffective for a teacher, just as like the learning process of the student in the classroom could attract high or low achievement, depending on the learning styles of the student, and instructional strategies of the teacher. Thus, the students' learning styles may determine their success or failure in the school. In the late 1960s, American psycho biologist Roger Sperry discovered that the human brain has two very different ways of thinking. The left side of the brain is strongly verbal and processes information in an analytical and sequential way. The right side of the brain is strongly visual and processes information in an intuitive and simultaneous way (Auger, 2003).

According to Craig (2003), each of the teachers has his own peculiar way of taking in ideas, sights and sounds, reprocessing the information received in a highly individualized fashion. Brain research seems to agree that there are areas in the brain devoted to different tasks. The analytical and logical tasks appear to belong to a part of the brain that is towards the left, the visual emotional tasks conducted in an area towards the right of the brain, and varying tasks call on different parts of the brain.

(1) The left hemisphere of brain: Use analytical functions, details, and working with numbers (Dorfsman, 1997). Considered to be language dominant, sequentially ordered, logical, realistically focused and controlling the right side of the body.

(2) The right hemisphere: Visually and spatially oriented, creative, intuitive, gestalt or holistic, divergent, visual, controlling the left side of the body (Cooke, 1986; Webb, 1982; Williams, 1983; Wonder & Donovan, 1984).

3.5 The curriculum and instruction

The public school curriculum tend to reflect and appeal more to the traditional lecture and demonstration approaches which complements left-brain curriculum—lesson plans, instructional strategies and assessments/standardized testing, etc. for many children. Wesson and Holman's (1994) study revealed that, African American females showed a left-brain. Males develop right brain functions earlier than females (Cane & Cane, 1991). The teacher's task should be to encourage inner city students to be intuitive and imaginative, start their teaching preferably with broad ideas and then pursue supporting information. Most of the students learn best by seeing and doing in an informal, busy and somewhat unstructured environment, as well as group discussions simulations, panels, and other activity-based learning (Lyons, Kysilka & Pawlas, 1999).

3.5.1 Challenged and task for classroom teachers

(1) Use communicative techniques with appropriate language learning activities;

(2) Encourage student interaction, motivate creativity and innovation of their innate talents;

(3) Introduce games for students, using colors and pictures, etc.;

(4) Use variety of teaching aids and instructional materials that reflect the hip-hop culture—videos, movies, projectors, computers/Internet, posters, songs and poetry books, biographies of stars, newspapers, magazines, radio news reports, demonstrations, etc.;

(5) Invite guest speakers to the classroom, introduce writing projects and journals that reflect news in the environment and their cultures.

In addition, all the above teaching strategies need integration in the lessons for functional reading, writing, life skills and promoting social skills in the classroom. Students are encouraged to conduct research in the library

and internet, read books and biographies (in the field of music, sports and general issues. Students write articles, book reports and poetry, and make presentations in class on the areas of hip-hop artistes with transcribed musical message and lyrics. The lyrics must contain meaningful messages worthy for class discussions and assignments contrary to the original songs/information (see Appendix). Students get excited and ready to learn when issues pertaining to their cultural interest are used as topics for discussions and assignments in the classroom—music, videos and sports.

3.5.2 Classroom accommodation for students

- (1) Encourage student intuition to guess meanings from context, without necessarily working out all the details;
- (2) Use pictures and images to help students remember ideas and words;
- (3) Use music, poetry, or art to help the student learn;
- (4) Provide the needed materials and resources in class;
- (5) Be creative with the hip-hop music/songs/lyrics of popular artistes (50Cent, Eminem, Kid Rock, Kenny Chesney, Tupac) to teach lessons—life skills, language arts, history, social studies, social skills, job skills, etc.

Give extra time to complete class tasks. Taking into consideration of student diversity in American schools, the classroom teachers should be flexible and incorporate other forms of music (other than hip-hop) in the life skills lesson. For example, they can use country music stars, like Kenny Chesney (shift work song), Dolly Patton (working 9-5, and the coat of many colors songs), reggae music from Bob Marley or Sean Paul. There are European music, Salsa music, Chinese, Indian and Middle Eastern songs, Rock and Jazz music, including World music like Afrobeat (Fela Kuti, Lagbaja, Femi Kuti) and Highlife music from Nigeria, Ghana, Sierra Leone, South Africa; Soukous music, Kora and Mbalax music from Senegambia, etc. Some of the songs may need the presence of guest speakers who would serve as translators of the vernacular from such countries, for better student interaction and understanding during the lesson. This scenario creates opportunity for learning about other cultures in the classroom.

3.5.3 Classroom benefits of this process

Students are excited and motivated to do class work—reading, writing, math, social studies, history, arts, etc; this is because the teacher reached out to them in a special way. Their enthusiasm, readiness to learn and creative skills begin to unfold. Other improvements and gains to the classroom include, improvement in self-esteem, self-awareness on critical societal issues, development and acquisition of various skills—social, listening, writing, reading fluency, communication and ability to interact positively with each other. The students would understand their teacher’s teaching styles, participate in acceptable classroom behavior and show great respect to the teacher. Moreover, there will be improvement on math computation abilities and skills of the students in dealing with figures concerning artistes record sales and ringtones downloads. The students would be able to transfer or generalize such knowledge to other settings or given assignments.

Limitations: There may be a rowdy, distractive classroom with disciplinary issues, especially where the teacher has limited knowledge of the subject matter, instructional ability and musical skills.

4. Recommendations

Teachers and therapists should use entertainment materials and resources for varieties of instruction in the classroom. Students with emotional disabilities require special supports that would soothe their feelings in the classroom, as well as opportunities for self-expression. The use of hip-hop music in lessons is essential in this area.

With the exposition of children to cable TVs, radio broadcasts at school and home for hours daily; these audio and visual images influence our students on a daily basis. It reflects on their lifestyles and attitudes; so teachers can as well use them in the classrooms for instructional purposes and impart positive education.

Use music, fine arts, drama, and any feasible strategies during instruction to develop self-awareness, responsibility and leadership skills among the students. It helps in the acquisition of self-determination skills.

Include hip-hop culture materials and resources/teaching strategies in public school curriculum. It is a good method of promoting differentiated instruction in the schools.

Assign projects based on the works of famous entertainers—music, sports, film, drama and soap opera.

Parent-teacher collaboration: where parents share what they know about their sons' needs, teachers share their expectations, and together devise strategies to meet student needs. It is a unique technique to prepare and implement person-centered planning and transition programs for students with disabilities into adulthood.

5. Conclusion

Can every child learn irrespective of the cultural traits? Research has demonstrated that at-risk students, (including individuals with emotional disabilities) can achieve far higher levels in learning, argues Slavin, Madden, Dolan, Wasik, Ross and Smith (1994). For example, research on early intervention and research on one-to-one tutoring demonstrate the principle that virtually every child can learn, whether African, Asian, American, or Pacific Islander. All the children or students need are creative and committed instructors to facilitate effective teaching-learning process through the infusion of information and materials that would provide real life experiences and knowledge to them. Teachers must think outside the box as they prepare lesson plans and embark on the actual instructional delivery process.

In conclusion, Craig (2003) recalled that:

We all begin formal learning at school and the traditional school model suits the way some brains work but for others, their way of thinking excludes them from the success they are capable of achieving. The visual learner, who favors the right brain often encounters problems when faced with logical, analytical, sequential tasks or explanations. Einstein did poorly at school and so did Richard Branson. These individuals, whose fine minds thought in pictures, found school too difficult. The complexity of the future we all face requires that all our different learning styles need accommodation, and the more we know about how we learn, the more likely we are to achieve success.

Therefore, we should incorporate different forms of music (not only hip-hop) where appropriate in our instructional and therapy process in the classroom, especially for emotionally challenged individuals—be they children or adults. Schools should encourage the use of appropriate music and videos in the classroom, just as the medical professionals use music in their facilities during the treatment of certain patients because of its therapeutic values. In the classroom, it can appeal to the learning styles of the exceptional students, ensure emotional stability during lessons, and promote great achievement in different subject areas if encouraged.

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