Book Review

Slam School: Learning Through Conflict in the Hip-Hop and Spoken Word Classroom

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Hip-hop culture continues to have a significant influence on youth, and a growing number of educators are adopting strategies to introduce it in their classrooms. While most of these teachers are members of the hip-hop generation, *Slam School* explores the dynamics of teaching and learning through the story of Tim, a teacher unfamiliar with hip-hop who utilized student-centered pedagogy to engage with hip-hop culture and spoken word curriculum. *Slam School* delves into Tim’s curricular practices and classroom experiences in three urban high school classrooms, where discourse was filled with conflict, tension, and ambivalence. Consequently, the author, Bronwen Low (2011), builds a compelling argument, “The very reasons teachers and administrators might resist the deliberate introduction of hop-hop into the planned curriculum … are what make hip-hop pedagogically vital” (p. 1). This critical book review not only elaborates on these ideas, but also situates Low’s text in the context of related scholarly material. This paper will begin with a brief summary of the book. *Slam School* will then be used to illustrate how critical pedagogy disrupts the ‘dominant culture’ by emphasizing the narratives of those who are otherwise marginalized and oppressed. The paper then engages with Michael Apple’s framework of *The Hidden Curriculum* to advocate for the pedagogical
value of conflict, and how it can lead to new understandings and insights for both teachers and students.

Summary

Low begins her text by discussing hip-hop’s significant impact on youth culture, deeming that it has had a strong influence on African American and Latino students. Intriguingly, it was these minority populations that predominantly filled the classrooms in which Low’s research took place. Low asserts that while student populations in schools have become increasingly diverse, the teaching population remains overwhelmingly white. She therefore advocates for culturally relevant pedagogies that not only enable teachers to connect with their students, but also assist teachers to understand students’ needs and engage with their interests. Low’s text is thus comprised of the research that took place in Tim’s classes, in which students developed slam poetry (personal narratives that are often shared in front of larger audiences) and engaged in critical dialogue surrounding hip-hop.

After discussing hip-hop’s rich history, Low demonstrates the complexities surrounding hip-hop culture, and students’ connections with it. Low suggests that hip-hop not only opens possibilities for dialogue, but also presents its own boundaries and limitations. Thus the text examines the conversations that took place within hip-hop’s ‘parameters’, and highlights the conflicts that ensued between students within these interactions.

In her final chapter, Low discusses some resources which educators can draw upon to engage with hip-hop education in their classrooms. In addition, Low suggests that Faculties of Education include a component of hip-hop education through which pre-service teachers can gain greater awareness of the diverse needs and interests of urban youth. In her closing remarks, Low reiterates the need for teachers to integrate hip-hop education in their classrooms to engage minority youth.

Critical Hip-Hop Pedagogy

To establish the framework for her research, Low discusses the multiple ways in which minority students have experienced marginalization and oppression in schools. She cites current curricular approaches that have devalued students’ needs and interests. Low’s ideas draw on Paulo Freire’s (1970) theoretical perspectives on critical pedagogy. He too was critical of the oppression that lower-class individuals experienced on a daily basis. Freire (1970) developed a theory of critical pedagogy, which advocates for a Problem-Posing Model for education, and privileges the knowledges of marginalized individuals. Freire’s approach also promotes dialogue between teachers and students. Low’s theoretical perspectives are based on Freire’s notion of pedagogy, as she connects hip-hop education with the field of critical pedagogy. She calls this fusion Critical Hip-Hop Pedagogy (CHHP).

Through a dialogical praxis, CHHP seeks to provide pedagogic spaces where youth develop awareness of how they have been marginalized by larger social institutions. Dialogue plays a central role in students’ learning in Slam School. We learn that Tim’s classes are filled with dialogue, as the book is embedded with conversations in which students discuss representations of gender, violence, sexuality, race, and language
in hip-hop culture, creating what Low calls a “pedagogically productive zone” (p. viii). Further, students develop slam poetry, which, according to one student, allows them to speak “straight from the heart” (p. 94).

**Conflict**

Conflict is a central theme in *Slam School* and the book explores how conflict exists at multiple levels. The text features several stories of conflict and misinterpretation: between hip-hop education and the hidden curriculum; school and popular culture; white administrators and black and Latino students; and black and white students.

Michael Apple (1996) believes that curriculum is never a neutral entity. He argues that implicit within the *official curriculum* is the *hidden curriculum* which promotes the hegemony of the dominant culture (Apple, 2004), while excluding the voices and narratives of those who are of minority cultures. Low (2011) therefore believes that educators must continuously question the hidden epistemological and ideological assumptions that may structure the decisions they make and the traditions they select. In the context of teaching, hip-hop enters the conversation as a response to the suppression operating in the curriculum of traditional schooling. In Low’s research, hip-hop challenges the presumed wisdoms of the official curriculum, bringing attention to the narratives of those who are often excluded. Like Apple’s (2004) belief that the repression of conflict leads to the continuous functioning of the hidden curriculum in schools, Low’s research aims to address the assumptions inherent in curriculum, bringing conflict to the forefront.

Little has been written on the positive value of conflict, heightening the importance of Low’s research. Undoubtedly, most research in this area has emphasized how conflict can be detrimental to students’ learning, and has focused on how to eradicate conflict from schools. Low’s research, therefore, provides a different response to the issue of conflict, highlighting its potential positive contributions to school settings. Low’s ideas parallel those of Michael Apple (2004), who believes that conflict and contradictions could have positive effects on student learning. Low believes that embracing conflict in the classroom offers integral lessons and important learning opportunities for students.

*Slam School* is a book for everyone: for students experiencing marginalization in schools, for students considered part of the ‘dominant culture’, for teachers wishing to infuse hip-hop pedagogies in their classes, and, ultimately, for all individuals involved in educational contexts. Low’s ideas are significant to education for a number of reasons. First, the book effectively speaks to the importance of privileging student narrative at a time when standardized testing practices are being prioritized and implemented in schools. Second, it demonstrates how minority students are attempting to reposition themselves in response to a ‘dominant culture’ that fails to understand their needs. Finally, unlike other research in the field, Low’s study explicitly examines the tensions of implementing hip-hop pedagogies in the classroom, exploring why educators may resist its implementation in the first place.

*Slam School* leads its readers to consider intriguing questions: To what extent should educators integrate hip-hop into the official school curriculum? Through this integration, whose voices are being included? Does the inclusion of some voices lead to
the exclusion of other narratives? Whose narratives are then being excluded? While Slam School offers important ideas and insights for its readers regarding ‘pedagogy’ and ‘inclusion’, its significance lies in its ability to encourage new ways of thinking about ‘conflict’ and ‘contradictions’ in educational contexts.

References


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