Finding Lessons in Hip Hop: How Hip Hop (Helped to) Educate Four Métis Youth

Lucy Fowler

Context

There exists a common essentialized discourse about Indigenous peoples in Canada that has communities frozen in time, leaving Métis culture represented through sashes, jigging, and the fur trade. However, across the country, Métis youth are expressing themselves through hip hop culture. This article explores the impacts that being involved in hip hop culture, particularly the creation of hip hop, can have for the Métis young adult participants and the implications for education. It asks how hip hop culture and hip hop pedagogies can have a stimulating effect on Métis students' educational experiences.

Hip hop is a broad term encompassing numerous cultural practices (Alim, 2009; Stavrias, 2005), ranging from the well-known practices of rapping, DJing, graffiti art and breakdancing to the worlds of linguistics, politics and academia (Alim, 2009). There are several different origin stories of hip hop, the most widespread being Jamaican dancehalls in the 60s and 70s or the Bronx, New York, in the 70s (Akom, 2009). Despite disagreement on origins, it is generally accepted that hip hop is permeated and shaped by the social, political, and cultural events in the community. By the end of the 20th century, when Afrocentrism and Black nationalism were at the forefront in the United States, hip hop reflected that consciousness, with artists producing songs committed to validating "Blackness and push[ing] Whiteness to the periphery" (Alim, 2011,

p. 126). The customization of hip hop to the local community, which allows youth to foster deep connections within the culture, does not make hip hop a chameleon culture, absorbing attributes of the local, but instead demonstrates the easy multiplication of entry points into hip hop cultures; instead of *becoming* local, hip hop "has always been local" (Pennycook & Mitchell, 2009, p. 30). By absorbing local influences, hip hop is in a constant state of evolution, and ideas and techniques are continuously exchanged between American and global hip hop cultures (Androutsopoulos, 2009). Indigenous hip hop cultures too are politically and socially grounded, as well as being distinctly local and validating of Indigenous identities and concerns. This locality facilitates an easy connection for Indigenous youth to the "political history of oppression, marginalization and struggle" that is foundational to hip hop (Ibrahim, 2017, p. 104). Hip hop, as a "lived culture" (Stavrias, 2005, p. 45), is shaped by the work produced by its participants while simultaneously shaping participants themselves, who negotiate identity and "self-understandings" through the production and consumption of hip hop (Morgan & Warren, 2011, p. 940).

As a youth-driven cultural expression, hip hop is becoming recognized as essential to educators in their ability to make school a meaningful reflection of students' lives. Hip hop provides a space for discussion and disentangling the "politics of race, class, sexuality, gender, place, and generations ... through the discourse of power, privilege, and oppression" (Baszile, 2009, p. 14). Hip hop is not just a space of resistance but also a method by which to negotiate cultural values upheld by mainstream curriculum as well as other values ignored or excluded from official curriculum (Baszile, 2009; Ibrahim, 2017).

While Indigenous education can often be addressed through land and language-based education systems (Battiste, 2013; Dion, 2007; Metallic & Seiler, 2009), scholars are less clear as to what defines Métis education. Without a clear definition, I sought instead to examine how we could provide a culturally responsive educational experience for Métis youth. A culturally responsive educational experience is one that is grounded within knowledge of community, of language, and of culture. Battiste (2005) explains that misrepresenting experiences and knowledges is part of cognitive imperialism that "assumes superiority of knowledge and people" (p. 17) by prioritizing Western knowledge and thought processes, and does not require any cultural understandings or adjustments to be made by those in the dominant group. When thinking of Métis people in particular, and connecting to schooling, frequently the only Métis person to be brought up within the classroom is Louis Riel, leaving him to "[stand] as the only representative of the entire and diverse Métis nation in official school curricula" (Kearns & Anuik, 2015, p. 7). By disconnecting students from their identities, educators knowingly or unknowingly reinforce cognitive imperialism and guide students towards a lack of self-understanding instead of towards self-empowerment.

Methodology

This study used an Indigenous métissage methodology (Donald 2009), and qualitative interview methods along with participants' hip hop creations –rapping, beatboxing, and graffiti art—to story their hip hop engagements. Indigenous métissage involves, to use Lowan-Trudeau's (2012) term, an "integration of Indigenous and interpretive methodologies to form a new methodological métissage (mix) representative of my own identity as a Métis scholar and educator" (pp. 115-116). Donald (2009)

explains that, "as a research practice, métissage is focused on relationality and the curricular and pedagogical desire to treat texts—and lives—as relational and braided rather than isolated and independent" (p. 9). Métissage's focus on relationality appropriately reflects the participants in my study and my use of the metaphor of the sash. I use the sash to demonstrate the weaving together of the stories and experiences of the participants, a metaphor which I employed through my analysis of the data and the findings.

Data

When setting out to collect the data for this study, I wanted to ensure that I represented Métis voices from my homeland of Manitoba as well as from my community in Ontario, and I found the most success in doing so through social media, Facebook in particular. I initially recruited seven artists, including two female hip hop artists, but three potential participants either declined to participate or chose to withdraw from the study and my final participants were four Métis male hip hop artists from Manitoba and Ontario. One of the participants exclusively creates graffiti art, one participant creates graffiti as well as raps in a local collective, one participant is a beatboxer who also raps and produces, and the last participant raps. By collecting data from individuals across aspects of hip hop culture, this study was able to speak to Métis hip hop as a varied culture with multiple dimensions of production, instead of solely speaking on one aspect, such as rapping.

My primary method of data collection was semi-structured interviews. By not relying on a strict set of questions, I intended to create an environment where participants felt valued and part of a reciprocal process and to give participants the opportunity to talk about their involvement with hip hop, their constructions of

personal success, and their school experiences in ways that they felt most important.

Wilson (2008) explains that the interview process in "Indigenous research cannot really take place without ... deep listening that leads to meaningful exchanges [and the] forming [of] a relationship that goes beyond the informant-researcher duality to becoming co-learners" (p. 113). To foster such a relationship, the interviews always began with the participant and I take time to get to know one another through conversation and through the participant sharing their form(s) of hip hop. Additionally, all the participants provided examples of their own work, from photographs of their graffiti to lyrics of their songs, for inclusion in the data. These examples were used to add context during analysis of the interviews.

Findings

Taken together, the youth told a collective story with three themes: finding a path (hip hop as a vehicle for identity and identifying, including moving from youthful rebellion to an understanding of oneself); helping others find a path (hip hop to build relationships and community, the intergenerational nature of hip hop learning, and working against damage-centred hip hop culture); and hip hop to connect to school. This final theme connects their hip hop stories back to schooling and the implications for hip hop pedagogies as literacies that support Métis education in schools and classrooms.

Finding a path (hip hop as a vehicle for identity and identifying). All four participants found hip hop through searching for their own identities, by emulating those around them, and in most cases, through a desire to stay out of gang life and a refusal to

emulate some others in their lives. Three participants began with hip hop by attempting to produce hip hop texts (rap lyrics, graffiti pieces, et cetera) in the style of someone they admired, whether it was a prominent New York graffiti artist or a fellow student at the high school who had a black book full of sketches. Participants' transition from mimicking to unique creation was not a quick one. One participant explained that "it took a couple years to be able to be creative on my own and to really express myself through the art." Another called the first time that he picked up a spray can a "mess" and a third declared that his first tag was "the most awful shit you've ever seen." Despite their initial challenges, each artist continued to practice and improve their techniques until they had a product of which to be proud. Another aspect of identity and identifying is the ethos of hard work and dedication to their craft that runs through each participant's story. Such dedication contrasts strongly with the deficit view of allegedly underachieving Indigenous youth and/or youth of colour due to "individual pathology or cultural adaptations, [stemming] from social disorganization in their communities, or lack of individual effort" (Akom, 2009, p. 60). Clearly, individual effort abounds when it is directed towards an outcome or product that is significant to the individual.

Helping others find a path: Hip hop to build relationships and community. The collaborative nature of hip hop makes it easy to use hip hop to facilitate new relationship and community-building. One of the participants utilized consuming hip hop music together and free-styling about mutually important topics to quickly create a bond with new acquaintances. One participant spoke at length about creating a community of hip hop artists and appreciators around himself from an early age. Through this community, he received encouragement and inspiration and was able to give that back. In this community "most of us work well

together and push each other ... helping each other, and trying to create a business for everyone and a local scene" instead of fighting only for one's own success. The community comes together to help each other on projects or promote each other's work.

Being part of a community of producers and consumers of hip hop also necessitated the participants' need to demonstrate a better path for the younger generation coming up in hip hop and the larger community. The two participants who have spent the most time in the hip hop community espoused the importance of showing a better path to the younger generation coming up and leading by that example. A community that is so based on collaboration and supporting each other inherently requires respect and trust. One participant explained that he feels a responsibility to educate and engage youth in the community, not only to ensure they are better artists, but because "there's so many negative opportunities out there, like there's so many gangs out there, it's so easy to get caught up in that lifestyle." Having seen friends succumb to the gang life has motivated him to show that the hip hop lifestyle can be enjoyed without leading to dangerous situations.

Hip hop to connect to school. It can be difficult for students to push for inclusion of their own learning and processing styles at any age as the current school system is Eurocentric and "grounds our very understanding of difference as inferior, whether that difference be raced, gendered, classed, or even generational" (Baszile, 2009, p. 12). The stated or unstated view of hip hop culture as inferior and separate from formal learning in school creates another barrier for Indigenous students to connect to the school environment. Each of the participants expressed unique difficulties experienced during their time in the education system, but engagement was a common thread. Despite being an intelligent and

curious person, one participant stated that he "didn't see a reason to learn anything [at school], I didn't see a goal or an end point to it all." This led him to disconnecting from the educational experience and ultimately leaving high school before completion. Two other participants had similar experiences and expressed strong regrets about not completing their high school diplomas. Morgan and Warren (2011) found that young Indigenous men "who resist formal educational settings often thrive in informal settings, particularly participating in communities of practice with their peers" (p. 936). It is within the power of educators to reconcile these two communities and create a more inclusive and engaging educational environment. By disregarding ways of learning and knowing that these Métis students value, educators are limiting the access that Métis students have to the lessons other students are receiving through the education system. One participant lamented that teachers "don't express that ... just this little tool may help you in a different style of job" thereby limiting student interest and their personal investment in their own success. There is a distinction here that is important – the participants are not necessarily suggesting that hip hop itself be used in every course, but that the content be explored in a way that would be relevant to students who may pursue non-traditional career paths.

Each of the participants came to hip hop with a unique perspective and set of experiences, and has come away with different, yet equally important, knowledges. All four participants expressed the importance of relationship and collaboration, and shared stories of culture that illustrate alternative access points to literacy that could be taken up within the educational system. None of the participants began participating in hip hop culture to become more literate or to engage in Métis education, but each of them engaged with literacy and Métis education in their own meaningful

ways. Through encouraging Métis students to connect to hip hop culture, utilizing hip hop pedagogies in a meaningful way within the classroom, and engaging with Métis community members to teach in a way that reinforces Métis language, culture, histories, and knowledges, educators can create culturally responsive educational spaces that reflect youth experiences and understandings.

Conclusions

What influences do hip hop culture and hip hop pedagogies offer Métis youth? This was the first question posed in the research, and it is evident from discussions with all four participants that hip hop culture offered new ways to increase their self-esteem, build community, and strengthen relationships. Hip hop offers a language for self-expression, and a medium with which to express and work through emotion, positive and negative, safely. It makes sense, then, that hip hop pedagogies also provide culturally responsive spaces in which to explore emotion, self-expression, and literacies. At their core, hip hop pedagogies run counter to the mainstream acceptance of the formal education system and, by extension, Western knowledge, as the pinnacle of intellectual achievement. By validating the lived experiences of students, hip hop pedagogies do more than encourage engagement in education. Hip hop pedagogies are driven by youth and allow students to see their reality as valued and valuable and as a valid form of literacy with which to critically engage.

This leads me to the second research question: How might hip hop culture and pedagogy influence educational goals and paths for Métis youth? It would be hard to argue that a positive self-image and connection to others would not have a positive effect on educational goals. Recall that three of the participants did not feel a

connection to school and did not complete high school at all, while the fourth participant did not enjoy it. There was no evidence of the education system valuing either their interest in hip hop or their own Métis heritage and identity, leaving the participants feeling very isolated from their own educational experience. A shift in the dominant narrative of the educational system away from privileging Western knowledge could only positively influence Métis students as well as other Indigenous, racialized, and/or marginalized students throughout the country. While there may be differences in experiences between Métis youth and First Nations youth, or even differences amongst Métis youth because of where people come from and their connections to place, culture, and identity, all of these experiences are part of the larger body of Indigenous hip hop and have connections to Black hip hop as a form of resistance or talk back to repression.

The final research question asked: In what ways can hip hop stimulate and rejuvenate Métis education? While most curriculum re-embeds and re-centres White values at the forefront of all educational experience – curriculum content, teaching methods, school structures, and success measures (Alim, 2009; Baszile, 2009; Rodríguez, 2009) – hip hop rejects the centring and dominance of Whiteness and centres non-Whiteness instead (Potter, 1995). The creation of educational spaces where Métis students can engage critically with the cultural context of mainstream schooling would be a means of achieving a space for "transformative education" (Akom, 2009, p. 63), an educational experience that disrupts internalized bias and challenges students with alternative points of view. Indigenous students who find it difficult to succeed within the mainstream education system often excel in alternative educational environments (Morgan & Warren, 2011).

Through placing value on ways of knowing and seeing the world that are not expressed in the dominant educational structures, space is created for youth to share their worldviews. It is these other ways of knowing and seeing the world that participants shared through this research, including a multitude of things they learned through hip hop, from specific hip hop skills to how to navigate identity. As this study was done with four Métis men, it would be interesting to continue this research and explore how hip hop culture and hip hop pedagogies could support Métis women, girls, and two-spirit folks. This research study was inspired by my love of hip hop as well as a desire to give a voice to Métis youth who may not have the opportunity to tell their stories otherwise, and to use their shared experiences to influence conversations about education in Canada. The need for these stories and these perspectives is long overdue. A starting point might be the facilitation of interactions in educational settings with authentic creators of hip hop texts rather than dropping in a lesson about a rap verse as poetry, and allowing the creation or consumption of hip hop texts to take a meaningful place in curriculum. The inclusion of hip hop pedagogies may have provided these four young Métis men with a connection to learning and community that they did not find in the school system.

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Lucy Fowler is a Métis woman from Winnipeg, Manitoba, a city which sits on Treaty One territory and on the site of the Red River Settlement. She completed her Master of Education for Change with a specialization in Indigenous Education from Lakehead University. She is currently teaching as a third-grade homeroom teacher and as a Sessional Instructor at the University of Manitoba. She is part of the Red Rising Magazine Collective, and the Red Rising Education Team which is focused on developing unit and lesson plans to facilitate the teaching of Indigenous issues in the classroom in a good way.

Correspondence information not provided.