



Cultural Collision in Urban Schools

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Young African Americans face several critical issues such as dire economic circumstances, peer pressure, random violence, and feelings of alienation from the cultural mainstream in America. Black popular culture for these youth creates a value system born out of these same issues. This analysis will address the influence of Black popular culture on African American urban youth and its subsequent intersection with the culture found in secondary schools (cultural collision). Black popular culture will be examined through the use of two components: hip-hop culture and television media. Current literature as related to the topics discussed will be used to make recommendations.

Black youth identity is unique and multi-faceted. It can be affected by a multitude of factors including parents, peers, music, school, television, religious influences, and life experiences. For many inner-city youth in particular, self-identity is a combination of various complexities. These youth may face several critical issues such as socioeconomic despair, pressure from gangs, a lack of faith in government, and society's concentration on materialism and individualism (Berman & Berreth, 1997). These issues also have an effect on youth identity. Of the numerous influences and factors that shape youth identity, two, sometimes conflicting factors, Black youth popular culture (hip-hop culture and television) and school culture are of particular importance.

This analysis will concentrate on the development of secondary school-aged urban youth; i.e. those in grades 7-12. Urban Black youth popular culture will be examined by means of hip-hop culture and the media. Both of these variables have the awesome potential to shape youth identity. The American phenomenon known as hip-hop can affect youth in both positive and negative ways (Kunjufu, 1993). In a like manner, television too, can exert a powerful influence over youth. The media has the power to alter the

habits, feelings, and minds of young people, especially Black youth (Kunjufu, 1990).

For the purposes of this discussion it is important to also understand the significance of the urban context. Many urban areas across the nation are plagued with all types of social and community problems. Urban schools in these areas face challenges such as inadequate funding and teacher apathy. Resentment from external powers fuels the fire for the marginalizing and criticism of these schools (Ayers, 1994). Furthermore, youth in these areas deal with pressures from gang violence, drugs and alcohol, domestic conflicts, and depression.

Hip-Hop Culture

Hip-hop culture has a great influence on American youth. White and Cones (1999) write, "Hip hop is a catch-all term for a contemporary, urban-centered youth lifestyle associated with popular music, break dancing, certain dress and hair styles, graffiti, and street language" (p. 96). Hip hop culture has gone from primarily rapping, break dancing, dj-ing, and graffiti to including dialects, attitude, expression, mannerisms, and fashion (Dyson, 2001; Kitwana, 2002). In reference to its wider appeal, Kitwana (2002) asserts, "Rappers access to global media and their

use of popular culture to articulate many aspects of this national identity renders rap music central to any discussion of the new Black youth culture” (p.11). This emphasis on media opens up rap artists to audio and visual mediums. McCall (1997) writes:

Dr. William Byrd, a black clinical psychologist, pointed out that for young, impressionable people the mere fact that explicit gangsta lyrics are aired on the radio lends credence to their messages as truth. ‘When you bombard someone with those messages, it causes conflict, even with those young people who may have been taught other values. With these rap messages, not only are they being bombarded with radio, they also get video’. So it’s what you hear and what you see. It confirms that these are acceptable values in a subculture. (p. 60)

Therefore, this “message bombardment” can be influential to impressionable youth. Kitwana (2002) agrees, “Today, more and more Black youth are turning to rap music, music videos, designer clothing, popular Black films, and television programs for values and identity” (p. 9).

Hip-hop culture has become an integral part of the lives of many urban youth. Through its influence they develop various ideas about sex, relationships, success, and life (Kunjufu, 1993). In addition, these influences can have positive or negative effects on youth identity. “The ages between 13-17 are when they [youth] are particularly vulnerable to outside influence and before their values and ideas have fully developed” (Kunjufu, 1993, p. 81). Hip-hop culture is expressed through songs on the radio, glamorized by video, and reinforced by peers. The result is a particularly powerful form of indoctrination. However, this influence can be good or bad. Most of the controversy surrounding hip-hop culture has to do with its emphasis on male chauvinism, open gunplay, and illegal drug usage. Hip-hop culture has the ability to affect the values of Black youth through various mediums. Another important medium is television.

Television Media

The American media is a source of news, entertainment, and information. It includes radio, newspapers, the Internet, and television. For our purposes, the authors will concentrate on the media as represented by television. The media has the ability to spread truthful and positive knowledge or misrepresent people, events, and data. Unfortunately, many times the latter is the case. Moreover, television is responsible for imagery that negatively influences youth (Bush, 1999). Consequently, this imagery has the ability to affect youth identity.

Television is an important part of life to many Americans. Black youth, in particular, watch seven to eight hours of television a day, as compared to four and a half hours for white youth (Browder, 1989). Bush (1999) notes, “negative images presented in all of the media conspire with many hours of television viewing to produce a negative effect on Black children’s self-image” (p. 36). In

reference to Black youth and television, Browder (1989) observes the following:

- Black children tend to use TV as a source of role models. They imitate other people’s behavior, dress, appearance, and speech.
- TV provides examples of relationships with members of the opposite sex.
- TV is used as a primary source of learning and perfecting aggressive behavior.
- Black children closely identify with television characters – particularly the Black characters. (p. 47)

Given the amount of television watched by Black youth and its influence on their development, the images portrayed by the television media become extremely important.

Television many times promotes gender stereotypes and negative images of Blacks. A study conducted by Mamay and Simpson (as cited in Bush, 1999) concluded that “women in commercials were typecast according to three stereotypical roles: mother, housekeeper, and sexual objects” (pp. 35-36). Some research indicates that television has the ability to affect the way people view gender roles. Katz (1995) writes:

Stressing gender differences in this context means defining masculinity in the opposition to femininity. This requires constantly reasserting what is masculine and what is feminine. One of the ways that is accomplished, in the image system, is to equate masculinity with violence (and femininity with passivity). (p. 135)

In addition to gender, the television media also influences many youth towards violence. For instance, a 14-year-old Black male was sentenced to life in prison for the murder of a 6-year-old girl. He was imitating pro wrestling moves he watched on television (Ripley, 2001). Today’s Black youth are many times criticized and labeled as violent or rebellious (Dyson, 1997; Kitwana, 2002). Wilson (1990) asserts, “Deeds of violence in our society are performed largely by those trying to establish their self-esteem, to defend their self-image, or to demonstrate that they too are significant” (p. 54). This is not to excuse individuals for violent behavior, but it provides insight into other influences impacting behavior. Moreover, the television media promotes a value system based on materialism and immediate gratification (Kunjufu, 1990). In accordance with these values, too many youths resort to violence. Thus television exposure to negative imagery could possibly encourage a warped self-identity.

Identity Theory and Black Youth

Black youth who are matriculating through middle and high school deal with a considerable amount of transition. The transitions here are related to grade levels, geographic location of schools, maturation, and identity development (to name a few). Considering the latter, young adults share a certain amount of curiosity, exploration, and

discovery with regard to the development of identity (Tatum, 1997). However, Black youth in particular, begin to examine their own ethnic/racial identities even more than their white counterparts (Negy, Shreve, Jensen, & Uddin, 2003). Tatum (1997) agrees noting that “given the impact of dominant and subordinate status, it is not surprising that researchers have found that adolescents of color are more likely to be actively engaged in an exploration of their racial or ethnic identity than are White adolescents” (p. 53). In this state of heightened identity awareness is where salient and unconscious messages and imagery can influence ideas and values. Black youth are more sensitized to society’s view of them with regard to race. “Our self-perceptions are shaped by the messages that we receive from those around us, and when young Black men and women enter adolescence, the racial content of those messages intensifies” (Tatum, 1997, p. 54). Hence, identity development for Black youth is complicated by notions of race/ethnicity more than for their white peers, making this a time of complexity and vulnerability. This situation creates the need for direction and guidance from influential individuals and institutions, one of which is the school.

School Culture

The school itself can have a major impact on the development of students. During school, students are afforded opportunities for academic, emotional, and social growth. Students also interact with teachers and administrators within this educational environment that is founded upon certain values. Academics, opportunities for growth, different types of interaction, and value systems all play a role in a school’s culture. The school’s culture also has the ability to shape student identity.

A school is commonly defined as a place of teaching and learning. Karpicke and Murphy (1996) indicate that the culture of an organization is the set of values and beliefs of the organization, and these values and beliefs are normally shared with the majority of people in the organization. Thus, school culture is the shared value system of a given school. Specifically, school culture involves certain components. According to Pawlas (1997), “The key components of a strong effective school culture include shared values, humor, storytelling, empowerment, a communication system for spreading information, rituals and ceremonies, and collegiality” (p. 119). School culture is important to all that are involved with the school.

The school culture can affect student identity. Banks (2001) notes “the school culture communicates to students the school’s attitudes toward a range of issues and problems, including how the school views them as human beings and its attitudes toward males, females, exceptional students, and students from various religious, cultural, racial, and ethnic groups” (p. 24). When the school’s culture is characterized by value disagreement, lack of communication, and little collegiality (among teachers and students), many students see themselves as incapable, incompetent, and worthless. However, when an

environment promotes a school-wide value system, good communication, collegiality, and the utilization of ceremonies, students’ attitudes are much more positive. Karpicke and Murphy (1996) agree that a healthy (school) culture has a great impact on the success of students.

Taking all of this into account we find that those leaders who are interested in changing a culture must first try to understand the existing culture. In doing this, the leader and others would have to begin by respecting the various cultures that come to the schoolhouse on a daily basis, before imposing another culture.

Intersection of School Culture and Black Popular Culture

The values as dictated by negative hip-hop culture and the media many times conflict with the values of the school. Kunjufu (1990) notes that gangs and negative media promote immediate gratification and materialism, while parents and teachers promote long-term gratification and qualities such as moral integrity and honesty. Kunjufu (1993) also states that there is a concern about some hip-hop artists’ misogynistic and violent messages. In effect, students obtain certain values from this segment of hip-hop culture and television media and then bring those values to the school. Therefore, there is a conflict of value systems, which sometimes results in discipline problems and lack of communication between students and educators. In addition, peers can have a great influence on each other, even more so than the influence of adults (Kunjufu, 1990). Thus, the values are shared and become pervasive because of the influence of peer communication and pressure. Furthermore, Black youth spend much more time with peers, listening to music, and watching television than they do having meaningful conversations with teachers and parents (Kunjufu, 1994; Bush, 1999). The task for educators is to familiarize themselves with youth culture/value systems and realize the subsequent affect on youth identity.

Hip-hop culture has undergone tremendous growth as an artistic form of expression, fashion, as well a money making venture. Many have advocated censorship in order to curtail much of the negative influence of rap music. However, censorship may not be the appropriate response. It sends the message that artistic expression can be stifled by those who simply disagree. Therefore, a certain amount of responsibility must be placed on parents, guardians, and school officials. In effect, parents and educators should take a greater role in involving themselves in the lives of these youth. One must remember that hip-hop culture has a business aspect and the supply will meet the demand. What would happen if the consumers demanded more positive conscious images?

The media also has to be held accountable for its negative imagery. If not, then youth identity could be at stake. Chideya (1995) writes, “In the final analysis, it’s up to the reader and viewers to keep the media honest...pointing out times that the media has

misrepresented the African-American community can only make the community better. The media belongs to all of us. If we want it to work, we have to work” (p. 11).

Implications for Educators

In summary, there are many factors that influence the identities of urban Black youth. Hip-hop culture, television media, and school culture do have a serious impact on this particular group. At the heart of this analysis is the creation of a healthy positive value system. Consequently, those students who develop this strong value system have less of a chance to be affected by negative aspects of hip-hop culture and misrepresentation in television media and more of a chance to be influenced by the “positivity” exemplified in a healthy school culture.

Due to the increasing amount of cultural and social diversity found in society and in our schools, educators must find the right balance which promotes a healthy school climate while also embracing some degree of cultural pluralism. There should be a willingness and effort among educators to structure the school culture to ensure that individuals of diverse backgrounds are well positioned to achieve regardless of their predispositions in life. A school culture structured in a pluralistic manner, can lead to the self-efficacy and self-determination of students who may bring conflicting values from their environment (Banks, 1995). Banks (2001) insists “The culture and organization of the school must be examined by all members of the school staff...in order to create a school culture that empowers students from diverse racial and ethnic groups” (p. 22). This is extremely important because it helps to ensure that students are not being labeled incorrectly and are not subjugated because of inadequate cultural capital. Therefore, it is important for educators to help such students develop the kinds of value systems that encourage positive self-identities and give them the legitimate opportunity to become successful in school as well as in life.

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