

Embracing Urban Youth Culture in the Context of Education

Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz · Perry Greene

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Abstract The rise of post industrial urban centers and global communication technologies has created a distinctive Urban Youth Culture (UYC) with roots in Black history and social activism. In the discourse on education and Black youth, UYC is rarely seen as a positive force promoting academic achievement and self esteem. Drawing on the voices of Black urban youth in an all-male high school mentoring program, this article offers an affirming view on the significance and pragmatism of UYC to a group of young men at an East Coast high school. Findings reveal that the young men related to and relied on UYC to help them negotiate school and establish positive academic and social identities for themselves.

Keywords Urban youth culture · Hip-Hop culture · Rap music · Urban education

Introduction

In the public debate around urban youth and urban youth culture (UYC), much has been made of the violence and misogynistic references that too often populate the lyrics of many rap songs. University of Houston professor, Cameron White, aptly frames the current state of the debate on youth culture in general:

Youth culture is at the center of societal controversy and debate at present. Many from one end of the spectrum criticize its very nature and suggest

Y. Sealey-Ruiz (✉)
Teachers College, Columbia University, 525 West 120th Street, Box 79, New York, NY 10027,
USA
e-mail: sealeyruiz@tc.edu

P. Greene
Provost's Office, Adelphi University, Garden City, NY 11530, USA
e-mail: greene@adelphi.edu

ensorship and the like. Many on the other end of the spectrum also criticize the nature of youth culture and suggest that it only perpetuates the status quo and enhances corporate and American hegemony (White 2004).

Little is said of the positive elements of youth culture. There are many scholars, activists, artists and performers who promote thoughtful discussion on critical issues, particularly those important to urban Black youth. And yet, it is difficult to find public commentary on UYC that does not seek to disparage or censor the voices of urban youth. This article highlights the ways in which Black males in a high school mentoring program acknowledged how their affiliation with UYC led them to be negatively perceived by some teachers, staff, and students, yet served as a source of strength and encouragement in their navigation of school and construction of positive academic and social identities. The article also discusses the Black cultural movement of Hip-Hop, including rap music, and the historical and present influence of this movement in the lives of youth who live and attend school in urban communities. The authors argue that the positive elements of UYC need to be embraced by educators in an earnest attempt to successfully reach and teach their urban students. In this paper, the authors also argue against the persistent demonization of UYC by school personnel which, as in the case of this qualitative study, leads to disproportionate disciplinary action and further marginalization of those youth who identify with and emulate the culture's music, media, dress codes, and language use. Ultimately, the authors seek to make a case for the conscious and constructive aspects of UYC and an open and objective approach to teaching those youth who participate in UYC as a way of life.

What is Urban Youth Culture?

In the context of this article, urban youth culture (UYC) is used as a generic term for Hip-Hop culture which, over the course of the last 36 years, has evolved from creative urban expressions such as rapping, dj-ing, break dancing (b-boying and b-girling), and graffiti art, to a cultural movement which encompasses music, art, dance, poetry, fashion, as well as a Black and urban consciousness. In the early 1970s, Hip-Hop was born as a product of social action in the Bronx River Projects of the South Bronx. Afrika Bambaataa (Bambaataa Kahim Aasim), a former 'War Lord' of the street gang, the Spades, and leader of the Zulu Nation organization, is the father of Hip-Hop consciousness. In an effort to end the gang violence that plagued the South Bronx at the time, Bambaataa, along with the technical genius of DJ Kool Herk, organized large block parties where young people came to channel the tensions of the street through dancing and socializing in a safe and positive environment (Chang 2005). Rap, as an art form, began as personal narrative, telling the individual stories of urban lives ignored by the mainstream media. In the late seventies, Hip-Hop took the main stage both as a cultural phenomenon and as a commercial success (Rose 1994, p. 2–3). Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Hip-Hop solidified itself as a culture that involved "the four elements... verbal language, body language, attitude, style and fashion" (Kitwana 2002, p. 8) while remaining

true to its roots in the Black power and civil rights movements (Hill Collins 2006). Hip-Hop's participation in the larger (American) culture provides a vehicle for urban youth, and urban Black youth in particular, to resist the status quo of disempowerment that has been prescribed for them.

Greeson (2009) defines Hip-Hop culture as “an outgrowth of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements, the hip-hop movement represents the African American youth initiative to define itself and construct an urban pedagogy, a way of understanding and renegotiating how life in these urban communities could and should be lived. As a culture, hip-hop deals with music, language, dress style, and politics” (p. 151). Early on, Rose (1994) argued that “Hip Hop is a cultural form that attempts to negotiate the experiences of marginalization, brutality, truncated opportunity, and oppression with the cultural imperatives of African American and Caribbean history, identity and community” (p. 21).

Over the past three decades, globalization and de-industrialization have continued to eliminate jobs, foster higher levels of inequality, and further marginalize low-income urban communities. Urban youth have been particularly impacted by this transformation. The continued failure of urban school districts to provide equitable educational outcomes comparable to middle-class and wealthier school districts, the lack of jobs available for lower-skilled workers, insufficient health services, and an increase in the disproportionate placement of urban youth of color in special education and discipline programs have placed large numbers of low-income urban youth at risk. Large numbers of Black urban youth connect with Hip-Hop culture. It influences their understanding about life, politics and everyday choices. For the young men in this study, Hip-Hop culture was a way of life; the method by which they expressed their ways of knowing the world. This was reflected in their media consumption choices—the books they read, music they purchased or listened to, the movies they watched, and video games they played. Their urban youth culture was the lens from which they viewed themselves and the world around them, including the world of school. There is ample empirical and qualitative data that confirm the undeniable influence of Hip-Hop culture on student learning (Bynoe 2004; Dyson 2007; Ginwright 2004; Hill 2009; Petchauer 2007).

The young men in this study also reported that Hip-Hop culture helped them interpret how the world saw them. Hip-Hop culture has been accepted by some scholars as an intellectual means of expression (Dyson 2007; West 2004) and vilified by others who insist that it is self-destructive in nature and woeful in its outlook of Black life (Kilson 2003; McWhorter 2003).

Wang (2005) (as cited in Rovai et al. 2007) writes “[H]ip-hop offers a generational worldview that encompasses the shoes you choose to wear, whether you're inclined to vote or not to how you understand the issue of race” (p. 1). Additionally, Kitwana (2002) suggests that members of the “Hip-hop Generation” have a “distinct view of family, relationships, careers, racial identity, race relations, and politics that differ in part from previous generations” (as cited in Rovai et al. 2007, p. 29). The recent impact of members of the Hip-Hop generation (persons born between 1964 and 1988) on the American political process can perhaps be best understood in the election of Barack Obama, the first African American President of the United States affectionately known as “the Hip-Hop candidate,” (Peterson

2008). The influence of the Hip-Hop generation was undeniable in this historic election. Rapper and political activist, Killer Mike noted,

I think it's important that Hip Hop not understate its role...[its] influence over the presidential election. I've always viewed Hip Hop, because it was organized for young people by young people, as an alternative to violence, as more than a music, but actually the extension of civil rights. Because of that, Hip Hop has brought, for 35 years, people – black, white, Asian, Latin – together under the muse of music. So I think Hip Hop has a significant slice [of credit for Obama's victory] because Hip Hop exposed us to one another before politics did (Arnold 2008).

Another political voice in rap, East Coast rapper, AZ, noted with Diddy and Jay-Z and Mary running around with the Obamas ["Countdown to Change" rallies] I know they touched a lot of people, [even me] voting. This was my first time voting, and me standing on lines and seeing my peers, my A-Alikes, a lot of street brothers, it was like, "Wow, they brought out the whole Hip Hop community..."(Arnold 2008).

Rap Music: The Voice of Hip-Hop: A Voice of Urban Youth

Rap music, perhaps the best known feature of Hip-Hop culture, has led the way in this cultural movement. Beginning in the South Bronx in New York City in the mid-1970s, it was relatively unknown by popular culture until a music entrepreneur, Sylvia Robinson, released "Rappers Delight" by the Sugar Hill Gang in 1979. Soon after, rap blossomed into a mega-hit-making machine, and a means of producing a profusion of money for [white] music industry executives. Even with its commercial popularity, rap remained steadfast to its origins of social protest. Greeson (2009) notes the interconnectivity of rap music to Black social and political movements in America. Rose (1994) argues, specifically, that rap music emerged out of the alienation that many Black, and Afro Caribbean youth experienced as a result of their marginalization by the wider, largely white society, and points out that "Rap music is a black cultural expression that prioritizes black voices from the margins of urban America....From the outset, rap has articulated the pleasures and problems of black urban life in contemporary America" (p. 2).

According to Kitwana (2002), rap music has always had an instinct for social activism.

When UYC is critiqued, rarely is the strength of its social protest highlighted. Rap is an expression of protest similar to Black cultural expressions of the past. While many forms of Black cultural ingenuity (i.e. jazz, blues and rock and roll) provide social and political commentary, perhaps what makes rap so unique is its forthright and unapologetic critique against oppression, inequality, and the status quo. Rap critiques the white dominant society as the cause of Black pain and suffering, and asserts control, gives voice and power to those often made invisible by society (poor Black teens). For many urban youth, rap validates their life experiences and their existence.

There are few places in our society where Black youth can find refuge from the deluge of negativism and mistrust that often seeps into their daily lives. Despite the popularity of Gangsta Rap, rap has never really abandoned its socially conscious roots. Gangsta Rap does not solely represent rap music as an art. It is an anti social element of Hip-Hop culture that rose from the ashes of the Watts civil unrest and the power vacuum of the West Coast Black Power movement of the late 1960s. The lyrics of protest, social awareness and personal responsibility can be found in the songs of groups like The Roots, Public Enemy, and artists like Jay-Z, KRS-One, Mos Def and Talib Kweli Greene (formerly of Black Star). An example of this can be heard in the commercially successful song, “Get By,”

It’s easy to pull a breezy, smoke trees and stay drunk
 Yo, our activism attackin the system, the Blacks and Latins in prison
 Numbers of prisons they victim black in the vision
 And all they got is rappin to listen to
 I let them know we missin you, the love is unconditional
 Even when the condition is critical, when the livin is miserable
 Your position is pivotal (Greene 2002).

The lyrics of the song criticize the meaningless nature of Gangsta Rap and the negative behaviors it promotes. It also criticizes the criminal justice system and suggests that support and understanding is a way to help inmates find a better life. In a rage against police brutality, South Bronx rap artist, KRS-One’s “Who Protects Us from You?” gives voice to Black youth in poor communities who are constantly harassed by police:

Fire! Come down fast!
 You were put here to protect us, but who protects us from you?
 Every time you say, “that’s illegal,” does it mean that it’s true?
 [Chorus:] Un hun.
 Your authority’s never questioned, no one questions you
 If I hit you, I’ll be killed, if you hit me, I can sue
 [Chorus:] Order, Order!
 Looking through my history book, I’ve watched you as you grew
 Killing blacks, and calling it the law, and worshipping Jesus, too
 (as quoted in Rose 1994, p. 107)

Public Enemy, recognized as one of the top-selling Black nationalist oriented rap groups of the late 1980s and early 1990s, used their music to draw attention to the legacy of slavery, racism, economic oppression, police brutality, and white hegemony. They sought to raise consciousness and incite political mobilization of Blacks in general, and Black urban youth in particular. Today, groups like Dead Prez, and The Roots and artists like Common, Talib Kweli, Young Jeezy, Ghostface Killah, Jay-Z, and others continue to carry on the tradition of using rap music as political protest and social commentary.

It is as impossible to separate rap music and Hip-Hop culture from black culture as it is to separate jazz, blues, and R & B from black culture. This fact often fuels the efforts made by UYC critics to paint UYC participants and non-participants with

the same stereotypical brushes. In many circles of both Black and white critics, the mention of the word “rap” causes many to bemoan the violence, materialism, and misogyny present in many of the lyrics and music videos. Needless to say, for many of the rap lyrics and video scenes, these criticisms are valid. The problem, however, is not in pointing out the moral tensions present in much of rap, but rather in the ability of the larger society to recognize those elements of rap and Hip-Hop that promote positive self-image and responsibility. To condemn all of urban youth culture, in an effort to identify that which is distasteful, is to simultaneously condemn modes of cultural expression with which so many urban youth identify and value, particularly urban youth of color.

Schools’ Misperceptions of Urban Youth Culture

The adolescent years, the time when one’s effort to secure a sense of self is strongest, is the very time when many Black youth see their efforts muted and rejected by schools and the larger society. The relationship between school performance and a healthy sense of self is well-established. Ladson-Billings (1994), for instance, makes the case that the so-called achievement gap most identified with Black youth is in part tied to teacher perception. Their “perception of African American students interferes with their ability to be effective teachers for them” (p. 29). A concrete illustration of this dysconscious disconnect to the identity of Black youth is poignantly expressed by Ingram Willis (1995) as she describes the importance of her son’s racial identity:

A striking example of a teacher’s unintentional disregard for the cultural history, understanding, experiences and voice of a student occurred when my oldest son struggled to meet the requirements of a national essay contest entitled, “What it means to be an American.” One of the contest’s restrictions was that students could not mention the concept of race. My son thought this was an unfair and *impossible* [emphasis authors’] task to complete, since his African American identity is synonymous with his being American (p. 32).

Instead of ignoring Black urban youth or continuing to pretend as if who they are and what they value is unimportant, schools and the larger community should make every effort to celebrate their cultural lives and personal identities. Schools should embrace the aspects of UYC that have positive effects on their students’ lives. An approach to embracing and valuing UYC is through enacting a culturally responsive school climate. Schools are responsible for reaching out to all of their students and discovering ways to culturally “connect” with them (Gay 2000; Ladson-Billings 1994; Lee 2007; Sealey-Ruiz 2007). This is particularly true for urban schools that are often majority minority schools with a predominantly white faculty. Often white educators find themselves teaching other people’s children who represent diversity beyond race, ethnicity, and class, and include linguistic diversity, and, in particular culturally specific ways of knowing the world.

Educators and the schools they work in have a responsibility to meet students where they are even if there is unfamiliarity and discomfort in reaching this goal.

According to Delpit (2006), schools are places where young people come to find their places at the tables of power. Too often, that seating is limited or non-existent for Black and brown youth. If those with power are willing to acknowledge these youth, and extend opportunities for them to partake at the tables of power, perhaps then schools can be places where learning and youth culture intersect in ways that may influence the school success of urban youth.

Historically, Black urban youth have been misunderstood thus misrepresented by the media and larger community of which public education is most certainly a part. By extension, portrayal of public education in the popular media of Hollywood movies further exacerbates these distortions. Whether it's the playful street thugs who chase the young, new, and naïve white teacher, Mrs. Barrett, down an inner city street in the film *Up the Down Staircase* (1967), or the confrontation with Hip-Hop tribalism by the new, not so naïve white teacher, Luann Johnson as depicted in the film *Dangerous Minds* (1995), or the feisty Erin Gruwell's interactions with her students in *The Freedom Writers* (2007), media has misrepresented Black youth in general, and Black urban youth culture in particular. Nasir (2009) makes the case that the mass media offers very few identity choices for which Black youth can embrace:

For African American youth, media images reinforce stereotypes of these groups as potentially dangerous, anti intellectual, and downtrodden....She [Spencer] has argued that the presence of negative stereotypes makes difficult the developmental task of managing ego-supporting identity while coping with generalized negative imagery (p. 78).

The young men in this qualitative study lift their voices against stereotypes associated with them and their Urban Youth Culture, and reinforce their culture as a source of power and way of understanding the world around them. For these young men, how the media portray them and their culture is not how they view themselves. Like all young people, personal identity develops in phases. For many African American youth, as with the young people in this study, they are at a stage (Encounter Stage) when they begin confront who they are in the context of the larger (American) society. As part of the "psychology of becoming Black," it is not uncommon for young African Americans to encounter "events that force the young person to acknowledge the personal impact of racism. As the result of a new and heightened awareness about the significance of race, the individual begins to grapple with what it means to be a member of a group targeted by racism" (Tatum 1999, p. 55). Their response to this confrontation between self and society may lead them to embrace negative stereotypes and or not truly value who they are.

Background, Methodology, and Research Questions

This qualitative study emerged as part of a larger mixed-method study undertaken in late fall 2006 by the urban studies center (USC) where the primary author of this article worked as a Research Associate. The USC was commissioned to conduct achievement gap research at Riverview High School in upstate New York. As part

of a year-long “Diversity Project” investigating the academic performance gap between Black and Latino and white and Asian students (Sealey-Ruiz et al. 2008), the primary author of this article led a research team of eight university researchers and doctoral students, 14 Riverview teachers, staff, and administrators, and 13 Riverview students. This mixed-methods, participatory action research (PAR) study (Hall 1992; Fine and Torre 2004) investigated the factors implicated in an achievement gap that persisted at the high school, and was a significant part of the district’s self-study and plan to eradicate the achievement gap in the district. One major goal of PAR is “improving social practice by changing it and learning from the consequences of change” (McTaggart 1989). All team members participated in data gathering for the study. Teachers who felt comfortable conducting focus groups with their colleagues led a group with a researcher from the university or a doctoral student on the team. After attending workshops on qualitative and quantitative data gathering methods offered by the university researchers, student researchers conducted small-scale studies related to this larger study on the achievement gap at Riverview, and interviewed teachers and fellow students in the school community about the persistence of an achievement gap in their school. The university researchers, doctoral students, and administrators on the team spent 3 months analyzing SAT scores, GPAs, socioeconomic status (measured by free and reduced lunch), transcripts from 22 focus groups with 109 teachers, students, parents, and administrators, 14 one-on-one interviews with staff and parents, 50 h of classroom and hallway observations, surveys administered to 87 teachers and 475 9th, 11th and 12th graders, and school documents including yearbooks, newspapers, the school’s website, curriculum plans, memos to parents, and documents generated by student clubs and the Riverview PTA (Parent Teacher Association). Focus groups and surveys were conducted in English and Spanish. Data were coded using a within case and across case analysis approach (Miles and Huberman 1984). The major themes of School Climate/School Culture, Expectations for Success, and Student Engagement and Motivation emerged from the data. A particular phenomenon present across all three themes was the impact of Project Avalanche (PA), an all-male, all-Black mentoring program on the schooling experience of its participants.

A sub-investigation of this achievement gap study emerged as the lead author noticed a pattern in responses of the Black males who participated in the focus groups. At least 12 of the 20 Black males interviewed mentioned the student club, Project Avalanche in reference to its positive impact on their experience at Riverview High School. The young men claimed that Project Avalanche provided peer support, encouraged academic excellence, and served as a social networking system that connected them to other young men of similar interests. Thus, this study investigated the significance of an all-male, high school mentoring program to 12 Black youth. The significance of their UYC as it related to their in and out-of-school experiences emerged from this investigation and became the focus of the study. Specifically, the three questions guiding this study were:

1. How has participation in Project Avalanche influenced your life in school and outside of school?

2. What perceptions do you believe members of the school community (i.e. teachers, peers, administrators, etc.) have of Project Avalanche members? Why do you believe they perceive Project Avalanche members in this/these way(s)?
3. What should be the overall mission and focus of groups like Project Avalanche?

Three focus groups consisting of four members each, was held over 3 weeks (one per week). Each focus group lasted approximately 75 min, and was conducted during afterschool hours or during a lunch period when the young men usually met for their Project Avalanche meetings. One follow up member-checking session was held with all 12 participants. A list of themes from the focus groups was shared and their feedback on the accuracy of the themes was given to the lead author. Thirty minute personal interviews were held with three Project Avalanche members who were Riverview High School seniors. The purpose of these interviews was to investigate the influence PA had on the future aspirations of those students scheduled to graduate from Riverview in June, 2008. These personal interviews were conducted over 2 days, 1 week following the three focus groups. During the focus groups and personal interviews, the young men highlighted how their participation in UYC affected their schooling experiences, and how, despite some of the negative perceptions it created of them, UYC represented an expression of their cultural and group identity. There were three major findings in this study: (1) the youth in the mentoring program viewed their UYC as a strength and source of empowerment within their school environment, (2) there was a notable downside to actively participating in urban youth culture in school, and (3) despite some negative treatment and perceptions, the participants used their connection with UYC to help them negotiate school, and create positive social and academic identities for themselves.

Discussion of Findings

Project Avalanche: Representin' the Strength of Urban Youth Culture in a School Context

Touted as a haven for diversity, Riverview High School, a public school near upstate New York, often appears highly-ranked on the *Newsweek* list of America's Top High Schools. These rankings are determined by the number of Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate and/or Cambridge tests taken by all students in the previous year and divided by the number of graduating seniors. At Riverview, per pupil spending is almost \$20,000 per student. The school boasts that it dedicates itself to "educating each child to his/her fullest potential" Riverview website, (12/2006). The demographic make-up of Riverview's 1,300 students is 4.2% Asian, 19.1% Black, 34.5% Latino and 42.2% white. Many students (mostly white) graduate from Riverview and head to elite and Ivy League colleges and Tier-1 universities—those institutions focused on research and possess substantial research endowments. Even with the commendable goal of educating all students to their "fullest potential", as one administrator put it, "race permeates the school culture."

Many of the young men in the study reported feeling alienated in their classes, and found solace and a feeling of belonging in the company of a PA brother or at a PA meeting.

Project Avalanche was approved by the Riverview High School administration as a student club in late fall 2004 and began holding meetings during the 2005–2006 school year. As a Rites-of-Passage and mentoring program, it was concerned with developing “...integrity, discipline and respect in Black males while building on their desire to become healthy positive and productive students who graduate high school and attend college” (Project Avalanche recruitment flyer, 2005–2006). The creation of Project Avalanche was a direct response to the achievement gap statistics into which many Black male students in the school district were fitting. As one PA member put it, a goal of the group is “to promote a clearer understanding of who we are as Black males. What makes us happy, what makes us frustrated, and what makes us special. Not a lot of people think we special. [They] think we just Hip-Hop heads. Yeah, some of us are that, so what?” (focus group, 12/2007) As described by a founding member of Project Avalanche, the group is “dedicated to supporting the success of Black males in the high school and beyond.” Its academic goals are to get more Black students enrolled in Advanced Placement (AP) courses and onto the college track (personal interview, 1/2008). The PA “curriculum” stresses academic success as well as acceptable social codes, and commitment to family, culture, and community. Unlike the general impression by some that an affinity for Urban Youth Culture is the ultimate seed of self destruction (Kilson 2003; McWhorter 2003), the findings from this study suggest that in its best light, UYC can be a source of strength and positive self-identification. It suggests that valuing who young people are in the context of UYC, need not be detrimental to school success. On the contrary, as exhibited in this study, the very few classrooms that connected to the young mens’ UYC experiences and encouraged them to freely express themselves were places that contributed to their academic and social success. The acceptance of PA members’ UYC in school played an important role in their school success.

UYC in Action: A Campaign to Abolish the “N” Word

Project Avalanche members connected with UYC and influenced other students of color in the school community toward positive social action. The group’s first initiative was a campaign against the use of the “N” word (a term often used in urban youth culture in music and conversation) in their school community. The group printed tee shirts and sparked public debate among students in the school community which led to two town hall meetings where students debated the use of the word. In taking on the use of this term, which is considered offensive by many within and outside the Hip Hop community, Project Avalanche members were “representin’” a shared sense of identity (historically, Blacks had been called Nigger) and responsibility (organizing debate sessions around the term) based on membership in a socially constructed community (Irizarry 2009). As a result of this initiative, PA gained the reputation for being a socially-conscious network for Black

males at Riverview. The group gained community attention for their campaign, including press coverage in a few local newspapers. Other PA initiatives included college trips to two historically Black colleges and Harvard University, and a formal dinner in honor of their parents and other relatives.

The campaign against the “N” word encouraged social action among PA group members and other members of the school’s student body. Kwame, a graduating senior and PA member said, “It’s important to raise awareness. We’re raising consciousness, too. The more you learn about yourself, the more you realize that nigger doesn’t describe who you are” (personal interview, 1/2008). DeQuann, another PA member, was quoted in a local newspaper saying “I don’t think you can be empowered by the word...If any black person tells you that, I would ask them, ‘Do they call their mother the N-word? Do they call their father the N-word?’ When you’re using this word, you’re subconsciously degrading yourself as well as others.” Derrick, another PA member said “Sometimes we say it while joking, sometimes to get someone’s attention, and sometimes you just use it as a term of brotherhood. But there’s really no excuse to using the word once you look into the history of it (personal interview, 1/2008).” After the debates, some PA members and Riverview students vowed to stop using the word; however, some PA members supported the use of the word. Support for use of the “N” word is seen throughout elements of UYC: in rap lyrics and videos, and everyday language. The dialectic around use of the word includes supporters insisting that use of the word empowers youth who use the term and exemplifies how young people can ‘flip the script,’—take what society labels as a negative, and appropriate a “positive” meaning, thus, “nigga” becomes a source of pride and term of endearment and the drooping pants, born in a beltless world of prison, becomes fashion statement. This tension over the use of the “N” word is but one of the many paradoxes found in UYC. For example, in rap music, artists protest against oppression, yet many sexist lyrics seemingly support or encourage the subjugation of women. Hill Collins (2006) deftly the ultimate contradiction of UYC: the invisibility and simultaneous hypervisibility of Black urban youth. All at once, Black youth who are marginalized by society, and often made invisible regarding their needs in society, experience unprecedented global attention as they are “essentialized” into archetypes through the popularity of Hip-Hop culture, and rap music videos in particular.

Despite protestations to the contrary, this new colorblind racism claimed not to see race yet managed to replicate racial hierarchy as effectively as the racial segregation of old. The lives of poor and working-class Black youth who symbolize the contradictions of this new racism are especially telling. Ironically, this is a generation whose actual members remain written off, marginalized, and largely invisible in everyday life...At the same time that Black American youth experience these social problems, their mass-media images tell a different story. In the 1990s,

images of poor and working-class Black American youth as athletes and entertainers flooded global popular culture. The actual ghettoization of poor and working-class

African Americans may render them virtually invisible within suburban malls, on

soccer fields, and in good public schools, yet mass media created a seemingly authentic Black American culture that glamorized poverty, drugs, violence, and hypersexuality.

As a result, representations of these same Black youth became hypervisible throughout

far expanses of the globe (pp. 3–4)

Through mass media, Hip-Hop culture has “interpenetrated the global context and has been mutually influencing and influenced by the world at large” (Greenson, p. 151). This influence is most noted in international and national white teen participation in Hip-Hop culture, including their consumption of rap music. The lines blur when Grammy Award-winning white rap artists like Eminem claim this Black cultural art form as their own. So, while Hip-Hop culture, including rap, has expanded around the globe and drawn attention to urban youth in one way, in other ways they are still ignored or alienated. This can be seen by their marginalization in schools. Achievement gaps in academic performance, discipline policies which funnel them from schools to prison, and disproportionate special education placement all provide living testimony to their plight in too many school systems. In the larger community, they are faced too often with massive unemployment rates and disproportionate prison sentencing.

Urban Youth Blu’z: The Downside of Enacting UYC at Riverview High

From the outset of the Diversity Project, all members on the research team recognized that the achievement gap at Riverview was connected to race. In fact, the mentor/sponsor of Project Avalanche, the head of the school’s television and radio station, and a staff member in the school district for over 20 years bluntly described the issue by stating, “We got a problem here, the achievement gap. The achievement gap is about race and it’s about racism. And we are going to have some courageous conversations” (personal interview, 12/2006). Beginning with the campaign against the “N” word, the young men of Project Avalanche had begun those “courageous conversations” among themselves and invited other students across racial, ethnic and gender lines into the conversation. Project Avalanche members had a collective understanding of how racism and misperceptions about UYC affected their access to certain classes and their achievement in school. Jamaal, a freshman and PA member said “I think that being a Black male in this school, people think I am not going to do as good as I do; because I won’t lie, my pants are pretty low most of the time. Everyone wears their pants this way, but it doesn’t mean we have any less ambition than some of the white dudes that might not wear their pants low” (focus group, 11/2007). Poet and UYC advocate Kahlil

Almustafa (2008) wrote in his book *Growing Up Hip-hop* about his “Urban Youth Blu’z,”:

I used to wear my fitted cap low, hiding my eyes from the world I knew this society saw young, Black men as criminals. When I was fifteen years-old I wrote:

I guess I musta’ fit the description again. Five foot ten, male, African American.

I had already lived the Korean Store stereotypes of “you buy now,” metal detectors, and random police pat-downs. Society taught me I would experience

this life as Public Enemy Number One, a straight-up Menace to Society. I never thought I would make it past the age of twenty-one (p. 5).

Stuart, a Riverview sophomore and PA member mentioned that many students at Riverview who are active in UYC are perceived negatively and therefore treated as “less than” and “not as smart”:

Not everyone thinks that Black males in this school will make it. Yeah, a few teachers believe in you, but there are many who don’t. A lot of us are judged by what we wear, the music we listen to, how we tip our hats and our swag. How can you judge a whole group on what they wear? How can you say they ain’t gonna be nothin’ just because they listen to rap music? Where’s the logic in that? (focus group, 11/2007)

On the surface, it appears that Riverview has avoided some of the social pitfalls that affect many racially, ethnically and linguistically diverse schools; however, scrutiny of the college acceptance lists include very few Black and Latino students; and AP classes are brimming with white students while the “Time Out” discipline room is overflowing with Black and Latino (mostly male) students. Louis, an 11th grade student and PA member commented on this phenomenon, “Have you seen the ‘Time Out’ room? I bet you any day you go in there it’s filled with Black kids. Sometimes it’s ‘cause you come in late, and they send you there to get a pass which takes like 10 or 15 min, by then you’ve missed most of your class so you’re like I might as well stay here (focus group, 10/2007).” Other students also commented on how certain students are differently disciplined. Edward, a white 12th grade student at Riverview noted:

There is a divide. I guess it’s like that in most schools and it’s certainly here. What’s funny is that people seem to get along, you even got interracial dating. But it’s a difference. You clearly see that difference in who gets disciplined and who doesn’t (focus group, 10/2007).

Gerald, an African American male dean at Riverview, commented on the discipline rates at Riverview, “Yeah, I would say that Black males are more likely than the white kids to be suspended. Latino kids, they get suspended a lot, too” (personal interview, 2/2008). In schools across the nation, suspension rates have steadily been increasing because of “zero tolerance” policies which disproportionately impact African American students. Zero tolerance policies began in

earnest, after incidents like Columbine, to protect our nation's students from violence. However, according to the American Psychological Association's Zero Tolerance Task Force report (2008), while violence in school has continued to decline, there is no empirical evidence that such programs, which include increased police presence, security cameras, or random searches, have resulted in safer schools. What research has shown; however, is the disproportionate rate at which Black students are reprimanded and even expelled from schools compared to their white peers (Brooks et al. 1999; Skiba et al. 2002). Moreover, African American males are highest at risk for these exclusionary disciplinary practices. Marian Wright Edelman (2007), founder of the Children's Defense Fund, suggests that "The growth in school expulsions and suspensions contributes to increasing numbers of children and teens entering the prison pipeline" (p. 223). In K-12 public education, African American Students made up 34% of students suspended nationally, and yet comprised only 17% of the school population (Knaus 2007, p. 107). This school-to-prison pipeline begins with zero tolerance, but at the root of these policies are stereotyped notions of who starts trouble and who should be removed from school custody.

Activating UYC to Promote Positive Academic and Social Identities

Even in the midst of these glaring disparities in discipline, lack of access to AP classes, and negative perceptions held by people in the Riverview community towards them, PA members made positive connections to Riverview through their participation in Project Avalanche. Louis, a junior and 2-year member of PA said, "I feel like Project Avalanche is there for me when I need them. They help me deal with a lot of craziness in this school; they let me know there's somewhere to go, where somebody's not always ready to jump at me" (focus group, 12/2007).

Members of Project Avalanche understood that how they dressed, walked, and talked which undoubtedly reflected and otherwise represented UYC, targeted them for lowered expectations by some teachers, administrators and staff. The young men were able to resist these negative perceptions held by others through their active affiliation with Project Avalanche, thus relying on their connection to UYC and other urban youth for strength to oppose these stereotypes,

I think Project Avalanche has a very positive influence on me. Now I push more, try to do my best. – Elliot, Freshman

Avalanche is like a brotherhood, but for African American males in the school. They help you. They help you set goals and work against the odds, and there are many of those. It gives us the drive to do more. – Kwame, Senior

Project Avalanche helped me realize that the grades I receive are not just for me. They are for other Black kids in this school. – DeQuann, Senior

Jamaal, a new member of PA shared, "The existence of Avalanche reminds us that this school is ours, too. We see success for ourselves. We want to go to college so we plan college tours at Black colleges and Ivy League colleges too." A key

component concerning motivation is self-efficacy; that is the degree to which one believes he or she is capable of completing a task. Bandura (1977), the self-efficacy progenitor asserted that self-efficacy is difficult to achieve while fighting self doubt, and Schunk (1991) suggested self-efficacy as a predictor of motivation and achievement across levels of ability. Students of color are consistently given messages about their “inability” to succeed in school and this produces self doubt and a negative sense of being. Researchers in multiple studies (Anderman and Anderman 1999; Finn 1989; Goodenow and Grady 1993) have found a link between a positive sense of belonging to a school and better academic motivation. As many studies reveal, a student’s sense of belonging to a community has shown to be positively related to student motivation (Battistich et al. 1995; Osterman 2000). The peer relationships among the Project Avalanche men emerged as a strong student motivator. Rashid, another new member to PA made this observation after two meetings with the group: “If your friends are doing good, you’re gonna want to do good. My friends don’t pressure me to do good—they just expect me to do good” (focus group, 11/2007) Two PA members, DeQuann and Morris of the 2007–2008 Riverview graduating class were accepted to Howard, and Lincoln Universities, two Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), and another senior, Kwame, accepted an invitation to attend Harvard University. Project Avalanche members gained a healthy sense of community from the positive interactions with their group members, which served as a gateway to positive self image and school success. By the close of this study, Project Avalanche members recognized that their group represented more than its campaign against the “N” word, college trips and appreciation dinners—it served as an inspiration to others and a model for future student clubs. Its success as a support group encouraged the creation of similar groups at Riverview High School: an all-female African American group known as *Lady Avalanche*, and the male and female versions of Project Avalanche for Latino students—*El Barrio* and *La Verdad*, respectively. It should be noted that Latinos were also welcomed into the Avalanche group, and by the close of this study, two Latino freshman had inquired about membership in the group.

Conclusion

There is more to the concept of UYC than geography or disposition, particularly as it relates to reaching Black youth in urban (and suburban) settings. The authors of this article suggest that UYC should receive the recognition and respect it deserves for empowering urban youth who are pushed to the margins. Few voices are more marginalized or muted in our society and in our classrooms than that of urban Black males. They often are not given the outlets to discuss the effect of racism and discrimination on their daily lives. This is in part because in spite of the efforts made by our first African American president (Obama 2008), Americans are still uncomfortable talking about race and its almost constant companion racism. Much has been made about the difficulty American schools have with discussing and confronting race and racism (Greene and Sealey-Ruiz 2008; Greeson 2009; Hillard 2001). If we were truly living in a post racial America, this discomfort would be just

that, a minor discomfort. Racism is still a problem with long tentacles impacting the quality of lives of everyday people. Placed in the context of a de facto segregated public school; a biased criminal justice system; a cynically racialized electoral process; a media (particularly the news media, and Hollywood movies) too prone to stereotype; and a foster care system flooded with black and brown children nobody wants, it is hard to argue that some very nasty vestiges of racism don't still exist. Yet Beverly Tatum reports that "a white student I knew asked me why I would be teaching a course on racism. She replied with some surprise in her voice, 'Oh is there still racism?'" (p. 3). Friere and Macedo (1995) were also quite aware that this issue still pervades American society:

They [Blacks] are still followed in stores, not because they are being rendered great service, but because they are black. Being a renowned intellectual did little for Cornel West, who watched nine taxis go by all refusing to pick him up as a passenger in the streets of New York just because of the color of his skin. Henry Louis Gates's prominence as a scholar did not lessen the pain of racism he had to face at Duke University [or in Cambridge Massachusettes], bell hooks' eminence as a major feminist scholar does not lessen the pain of racism coupled with the sexism that she endures (p. 402).

The real-world manifestation of this problem can be found in the cruel intent that goes into sending death threats to prominent Black and mixed-race male celebrities, or in the loss of Black lives in New Orleans, or the rush to find excuses for the police officers who killed, Amadou Diallo, an unarmed Black male in a hail of 50 bullets, or for arresting a Black Harvard professor in his own home. It is simply unrealistic to believe that in the context of schools Black and brown children are treated any differently. Schools are not exempt from the frailties of the wider society.

The persisting contradiction inherent in the standard critique of Urban Youth Culture is that mainstream society in the United States as well as other countries, have embraced the accoutrements of urban youth culture, even while rejecting the very youth who created it. The voices of the Black youth in this study are reminders of why schools need to be places where Black youth and their cultural values should be embraced.

The findings from this study with 12 Black males offer educators concrete reasons why educators' acceptance of UYC can yield positive social and academic outcomes for academically and socially marginalized students. Below is a brief list of Habits of Mind that educators who teach members of UYC should engage in if they wish to have successful outcomes in reaching their students:

- *Appreciate* (if not enjoy) students' cultures and the diversity they bring to the classroom.
- *Encourage* African American and Latino/a youth to connect to their cultures.
- *Understand* that educator's dispositions around Black and Latino/a children, as well as Urban Youth Culture, can negatively affect their relationships with these students. *Allow all* students to explore their interests in the context of a classroom setting.

- *Help* and encourage students to feel good about themselves, including facilitating the creation of youth-oriented, student-centered clubs and organizations that address the interests of students.
- *Value* the communities, cultures, and families of students in meaningful ways.
- *Listen* to students and become conversant in what interests them.
- *Get involved* in establishing or expanding mentoring programs for Black (and Latino/a) youth, and other groups in the school or community who are at risk of dropping out (i.e. over aged students, students experiencing legal trouble, or students with difficult personal circumstances: i.e. foster care, homelessness, etc).

Beginning with these Habits of Mind, educators can move toward embracing their urban students' culture in the classroom and encourage successful social and academic outcomes for them. These Habits of Mind do not ask educators to embrace negative elements of any cultural expression, but rather to embrace the whole person, along with whatever cultural luggage they bring. The authors do not ask educators to ignore negative aspects of Hip-Hop (Gangsta Rap) or UYC, but rather to engage youth in constructive dialogue in the context of educational success. The alternative is to ignore, or even worse, invalidate the values and life experiences of many urban youths sitting in their classrooms. Taking students as and who they are, and helping them see a pathway to their own success is a time-honored pedagogical strategy that invokes the teaching of educational progressives which date as far back as John Dewey.

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