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The Use of Music to Teach Life Skills to Students with Emotional Disabilities in the Classroom

The Issue

There is a strong need for educators to use multiple culturally responsive teaching techniques to engage a diverse population of students in active learning that promotes self-advocacy and educational performance. Achieving success in an emotionally challenged classroom setting requires creative instructional strategies by general subject specialists and special education teachers to meet the growing influence of music, hip-hop culture on urban youths, especially students with emotional or behavioral disabilities. Hip-hop culture emanated from a musical movement fused with urban lifestyles which began in New York in the early 1970s.

What is emotional disability? A condition exhibiting one or more of the following characteristics, displayed over a long period of time and to a marked degree that adversely affects a child's educational performance:

- An inability to learn that cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory, or health factors
- An inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers or teachers
- Inappropriate types of behavior or feelings under normal circumstances
- A general pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression
- A tendency to develop physical symptoms or fears associated with personal or school problems (Knoblauch & Sorenson, 1998).

The term **life skills** according to UNICEF (2008) refers to a large group of psycho-social and interpersonal skills which can help individuals make informed decisions, communicate effectively, and develop coping and self-management skills that may help them lead a healthy and productive life. Life skills may be directed toward personal actions and actions toward others, as well as actions to change the surrounding environment to make it conducive to health and daily living.

Students with emotional or behavioral disabilities can learn and be provided with successful instruction in the public schools. Teaching techniques like team teaching, differentiated instruction, task analysis, and cooperative learning activities have great inputs to effective teaching-learning process but the success of these teaching methods are being threatened by the influence of the hip-hop culture and indiscipline in the classroom. Students in

both general and special education classrooms, especially in the inner cities of America are engaged in some hip-hop culture thoughts, debate or activity with peers, which have huge potentials for class lesson disruptions. Why not liven up your classroom with some hip-hop music during lessons and see the difference?

Marian Wright Edelman of the Children's Defense Fund (2005) revealed that every school day, a public school child is either suspended or drops out of school. Wynn (2005) and Clay (2006) argued that such children suffer from a cultural disconnect in the classrooms and schools, citing their infatuation with hip-hop music and radical/bizarre dressing and clothing styles as highly pronounced in these settings. This attitude affects classroom participation and performance of the students. The hip-hop culture is equally influencing students with emotional disabilities. This becomes a challenge to special educators in public schools to understand student disabilities, preferences, needs, learning styles, and expose them to a wide range of personal, intellectual, and artistic development opportunities in the classroom.

With this in mind, my paper reflects on the teaching of American youths (with or without disabilities) with hip-hop lyrics and music rhythms --- an instructional curriculum strategy to encourage positive participation, good behaviors and learning in the classroom. This is premised on the understanding of the student's culture and using such background to educate them. Between the 2006-2007 School Year; I promoted experiential learning, classroom participation and managed successfully the behaviors of middle school students with emotional or behavioral disabilities at Dorchester County Public Schools, Maryland, through the incorporation of positive musical attitudes; using lyrics of artistes like Tupac, 50Cent, Rascal Flatts, Eminem, Beastie Boys, Kanye West, Fat Joe, Kid Rock, including their music instrumentals in selected lessons. My utmost success was in teaching life skills.

Over the period of one school year, I experimented with the students in my Emotional Disturbed Program with lessons on Life Skills, Reading and Writing.

My task as a teacher of emotional disability

- Use Communicative techniques.
- Choose language learning activities
- Encourage student interaction
- Motivate creativity and innovation
- Introduce games for students, using musical cues, colors and pictures.

- Use variety of teaching aids and instructional materials that reflect the Hip-Hip music culture – videos, movies, projectors, computers/Internet, posters, songs and poetry books, biographies of stars, newspapers, magazines, radio news reports, demonstrations, etc.
- Invite local performers as guest speakers to the classroom;
- During lessons, introduce writing projects and journals that reflect entertainment news within the environment and beyond.

In the light of the above, during lessons, different music and artistes were profiled, their lyrics discussed and adjusted to reflect positive messages supported by instrumental rhythms. Students were encouraged to conduct and participate in the following class activities during the life skill lessons:

- Recite the poetic lines and learn the vocabulary words contained in the songs
- Sound out the word syllables
- Write short essays on the implication of the music/song to the youths and how they affect the society, including themselves as exceptional students
- Provide constructive criticisms – pros and cons of such music/personal influences
- Write reflections on the life of the artistes, their message, identify the main idea, etc.
- Provide alternative statement for negative words/letters, slangs
- Participate in related group projects, among others.

Classroom Accommodation – during the life skill lessons, the following support is provided to my students to enhance understanding and active participation.

- Encourage student intuition to guess meanings from context, without necessarily working out all the details.
- Use pictures and images to help students remember ideas and words.
- Use music, poetry, or art cues to foster effective student participation
- Provide the needed materials and resources in class.
- Be creative with the music/songs/lyrics of popular artistes (50Cent, Kenny Chesney, Faith Hill, Bruce Springsteen, Eminem, Kid Rock, Tupac) to teach lessons – Life/Social Skills and hold meaningful discussions with the students.
- Give extra time to complete class tasks
- Apply positive reinforcements – praise, rewards.

The Gains

- Students are motivated to do other class work – reading, writing, math, social studies
- Develop listening and writing skills
- Build strong social skills
- Understand your teaching style
- Improve on self esteem
- Increase reading fluency
- Improve on math skills – record sales, ringtones downloads
- Good classroom behavior and respect for self and the teacher

- This is because you've reached out to them in a special way. Their enthusiasm, readiness to learn & creative skills shall unfold.

Limitations

- Class may be rowdy, distractive and disruptive
- Question of teacher's knowledge, instructional ability & Skills
- Disciplinary issues
- Tolerance of the school administration

The experimental outcomes were as follows:

1. It turned out to be a bold approach to cognitive development theory of learning. I asked my students to write and present hip-hop songs about aspects of some math problems I had taught at the same level a year earlier and they exhibited better understanding of the problem. Calculations on concerts tickets sold, merchandise sales, profits and number of CDs sold formed part of the math solutions.

2. In the area of knowledge management, hip-hop songs focus on presenting a message, and so, have become forceful mechanisms, useful in the instruction of American youths on daily life tasks. Classroom debates and quizzes on the positive and negative effects of artiste lyrics, issues raised in the song and societal implications take place during the lessons.

3. Classroom participation was greatly enhanced. Rap music contain spoken words not sung and had unique value as forms of participatory poetry for my students. Writing skills are enhanced among the students.

4. Functional Behavior Support is provided for the students with greater ease.

Recommendations

A). Use music/entertainment materials and resources for varieties of instruction in the classroom. Since children are exposed to radio, television and cable broadcasts at school and home for hours each day, and every week. The audio and visual images which influences their lifestyles and reflected on their attitudes could be utilized in the classrooms for instruction and learning.

B). Use music, fine arts, drama, etc, during instruction to develop self awareness, personal responsibility and leadership skills among the students.

C). Include Hip-Hop music culture materials and resources/teaching strategies in public school curriculum. This includes country music, classic rock, rhythm and blues or any type of music.

D). Assign projects based on the works of famous entertainers – music, sports, film, soap opera/drama.

E). Parent-Teacher collaboration: where parents share what they know about their child's needs, teachers share their expectations, and together devise strategies to meet student needs in the classroom.

In conclusion, students with emotional disabilities can learn and be successful in the classroom just like we believe that every child can learn irrespective of the cultural traits or disability. Research has demonstrated that at-risk students can achieve far higher levels in learning, argues Slavin, et al (1994). For example, research on early intervention and research on one-to-one tutoring demonstrate the principle that virtually every child can learn. Also, the authors stressed that extraordinary teachers and schools prove every day that they are able to produce extraordinary outcomes with disadvantaged and minority children. So does the use of music to teach life skills.

Therefore, we believe that rhythm, rhyme, and music should become part of the instructional process (Clay, 2006). It can appeal to the learning styles of the students and ensure student achievement in different subjects if encouraged.

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