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Engaging Black Males on Their Own Terms: What Schools Can Learn from Black Males Who Produce Hip-Hop

Abstract: Education scholars and practitioners have much to learn about engagement and motivation of Black males by directing their inquiries to more organic sites of hip-hop cultural production outside of schools. One such site is the hip-hop’s informal labor economy where Black males engage in earning money through hip-hop cultural production. Labor practices include a myriad of activities such as beat making, promoting shows, teaching dance classes, managing studios and recording sessions, artist development, visual art, and other modes of hip-hop cultural production. Through exploring the decision-making process of Black males that opt to participate in informal labor in lieu of formal labor, we examine what it is that compels their engagement and motivation efforts in hip-hop production. We find that participating in hip-hop cultural production gives Black males: (1) the autonomy to control their own image and maintain their individuality and (2) a sense of worth and belonging to something positive. From these findings, we discuss the need for schools to model themselves after such fields where Black males demonstrate high levels of engagement, motivation, and mastery.

Keywords: Black males, hip-hop, student engagement

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Black male school research is often premised on the notion that Black males\textsuperscript{1} are at-risk, underachievers, and disengaged with learning. Commenting on the

\textsuperscript{1} We use Black males to reference men and boys of African diasporic heritage (not exclusive to African American males) who inhabit lives consistent with the Black male experience (hooks, 2004; Young, 2007).
plight of Black males, Lee (1996) hints at such an experience, suggesting “Young Black males in contemporary American society face major challenges to their development and well-being” (p. 1). In education, Black males are at the bottom or near the bottom of all academic achievement categories and are grossly over-represented among school suspensions, dropouts, and special education tracks (Noguera, 2003; Reed, 1988). They also perform below their peers in basic subject areas (Noguera, 2008). In addition, Black males are more likely to be remediated or placed into classes for students with learning, behavioral, and emotional disabilities than other students (Fashola, 2005; Milofsky, 1974). They are also suspended from school more often and for longer periods of time than other students (Fashola, 2005; Noguera, 2003).

The Black male experience isn’t only typified by achievement differences between Black males and other youth; the overall school experiences of Black males are vastly different than other students (Coleman et al., 1966; Ferguson, 2000). According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP, 2004), nearly 70% of fourth grade Black boys read below grade level, compared with 27% of White children. Of our nation’s youth, only 12% of Black males test proficiently in reading, as compared to 40% of other American youth (NAEP, 2004). Even Hispanic and Asian fourth graders fared better on reading exams than Black males, although English is their second language.

It is increasingly apparent that Black males are confronted with a series of barriers that make it more challenging for them to achieve success as defined by traditional academic and social definitions (Kunjufu, 1995; Moss, 2007; Noguera, 2001). That is, many Black males are by far among the most threatened demographic in the American student population both in school and out (Brown II & Davis, 2000; Fashola, 2005; MacLeod, 1995). As such, Rosa A. Smith (Black Boys, 2004), president of the Schott Foundation, related these national data to other statistics that describe the multiple crises confronting Black males. She cited, for example, the Center for the Study of Social Policy, which reported that close to 40% of Black males will be jobless, either unemployed or incarcerated, by 2020 (cited in Black Boys, 2004). In addition to exorbitant jobless rates, the US Department of Health and Human Services (NAEP, 2004) reported that young Black men (ages 10–14) have shown the largest increase in suicide rates since 1980 compared to other youth groups by sex and ethnicity, increasing 180%. Among 15- to 19-year-old Black males, rates (since 1980) have increased by 80% (Poussaint & Alexander, 2000). Perhaps worse, Watson and Smitherman (1997) have found that a Black male is twice as likely to die before the age of 45 as a white male.

Given the magnitude of the Black male situation, Rose described the alarming situation of Black males in both schools and society as “catastrophic” (Black
Boys, 2004). She wrote, “The facts that startled us [the Schott Foundation] the most – and defined new Schott work – were the alarming data on Black male students showing bleak under-achievement on every school related factor” (2004, p. 2). Differentials between Black males and other American youth, especially in literacy, suggest that Rose is right: Schools have not clearly understood how to promote learning among Black males as a group. Moreover, the poor performances of many Black males on national assessments raise significant questions about the importance of social dimensions of learning and the relevance of culture in education design (Irvine & Armento, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

While the Black male educational experience is often detailed in tragic terms, hip-hop provides a space where Black males are portrayed as consistently performing well (Kirkland, 2008; Low, 2010; Sanchez, 2010). In this article, we posit that Black males indeed are engaged in learning and teaching practices; however, they are not always engaged in the types of learning or in the spaces that educators recognize or value (Kirkland, 2011a; Kirkland & Jackson, 2009). One such learning space is hip-hop cultural contexts that exist outside of traditional school settings. By invoking hip-hop in this way, we do not refer to the commercial entertainment industry built around hip-hop music but refer to the local spaces where youth and adults create hip-hop – music dance, visual art, beats, and more (e.g. Harrison, 2010; Petchauer, 2012; Schloss, 2009). Although hip-hop based educational practices are occurring more frequently in schools and in a variety of formal school settings (Hill & Petchauer, 2013; Irby & Hall, 2011; Petchauer, 2009), more organic sites of hip-hop including home music studios, entertainment venues, street corners, and stoops remain under-examined as important educational spaces. In spaces such as these, Black males (as well as other demographic groups) often lead and engage in education and labor practices that require substantive learning in terms of time and expertise (Irby & Petchauer, 2012). The insights from studying such spaces are beneficial not only to those interested in the out-of-school lives of Black males but also to those who are interested in creating more rich and culturally responsive in-school learning contexts (Kirkland, 2011a, 2011b).

Given the importance of hip-hop in the everyday lives of many Black males of all ages, how can educators and educational researchers work to better understand Black males’ lives as embedded within a myriad of hip-hop cultural practices? We believe that the answer is in deepening understandings of how Black males operate in more authentic hip-hop counter-cultural spaces (e.g. outside of school contexts) (Irby & Petchauer, 2012). We argue, here, that such understandings can inform the field of hip-hop based education and provide insights into issues that are of concern to educators, including school
engagement and life aspirations. Many hip-hop-based educational efforts use hip-hop as a starting point to teach disciplinary content or academic skills (e.g. Hill, 2009; Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2002; Newman, 2007; Prier & Beachum, 2008; Stovall, 2006). In such work, hip-hop is conceptualized as a text for students to read and perhaps deconstruct. The focus in many cases is on hip-hop itself. While there is educational benefit to such approaches, a sole focus on hip-hop culture as text can obscure the agency and lives of Black males (as well as other groups) that are central to the continual production of hip-hop. Black males’ commitment to laboring in the domain of hip-hop is arguably much more important than hip-hop in and of itself. Young adults of different economic backgrounds often devote a significant amount of time, energy, and money to recording studios, performance spaces, and promotional efforts in order to create, distribute, and sell products in local and international markets (Harrison, 2010; Irby & Petchauer, 2012; Kitwana, 2002). This commitment to labor in hip-hop underscores the ways that many Black males view hip-hop cultural production as a legitimate employment option. Kitwana (2002) argued that laboring in hip-hop gives Black males something to believe in and a sense of personal worth and satisfaction. While we do not contest his point, Kitwana failed to attend to the real inability of hip-hop to produce significant material gains that allow Black males to transcend their current class positions. As with other Black cultural practices, hip-hop cultural production and the unending dedication to it are of little material value to those outside of the culture and are deemed worthy to outsiders only insofar as they are profitable (Kofsky, 1998). Still, Black males continually engage in hip-hop cultural production. This article encourages educators to see the value in and learn from the engagement, creativity, aspirations, skill sets, and commitment to labor that Black males maintain within hip-hop.

Cultural production, hip-hop, and education: a theoretical framework

Framing hip-hop from the perspective of cultural production theory (Bourdieu, 1993; Kelley, 1997) draws attention to the fact that laboring in the Bourdieuan field of hip-hop is not dissimilar from working in school. Cultural production theory is guided by a basic understanding that cultural products, be they material artifacts, expressions, or values, are produced in various fields where producers struggle over power. Bourdieu (1993) articulated cultural production in terms of key areas for analysis: domains, fields, and agents. From a cultural
production theoretical perspective, hip-hop is not viewed as culture for trans-
mission from one generation, locale, or person to another. Cultural production 
theory emerges from a critique of structuralist notions of cultural transmission. 
Instead of framing people, in this case Black males, as passive recipients of 
culture, we use their position within the domain of hip-hop to understand their 
values, on their terms, in a field where they control their labor.

In our analysis, hip-hop is conceptualized as a domain or world, a uniquely 
symbolic space that requires, in this case, subcultural capital (Magaudda, 
2009) – hip-hop knowledge, authenticity, knowledge, and skills – to participate 
fully in production processes. Hip-hop in this regard is not unlike the 
domains of politics, business, or religion. Schools and hip-hop, we argue, 
are Bourdieusian fields where cultural producers take their work in order to 
have its merit judged (McIntyre, 2008). The fields are conceptual spaces of 
social relations where the production and distribution of ideas and knowledge 
reify and challenge what exactly hip-hop culture and its related practices and 
customs look like. Hip-hop is not unlike the field of schooling in its ability to 
stand alone as an investigative site through which to examine a myriad of 
practices such as engagement, teaching, and learning (Levinson, Foley, & 
Holland, 1996).

Central to any project that uses cultural production theory is laboring, since 
the act of laboring is the primary means to understand production processes. 
Therefore, we examine Black males as cultural producers. Kelley’s (1997) pene-
trative analysis of how Black males “put culture to work” is perhaps one of the 
most poignant portrayals of young urban youth’s labor practices as a radical 
departure from how we understand what urban youth are doing with their minds 
and bodies. He argued that “many of these young bodies are not idle bystanders. 
They are not uniformly devoid of ambition or work ethic” (1997, p. 53). Rather, 
what many people regard as “play” is actually “work” in the field of hip-hop. 
Framing youth engagement with hip-hop cultural practices as work reframes 
Black males as cultural producers: agents who make decisions, understand the 
domains in which they operate, and in at least some measure shape and control 
their environments via their willingness to put to work the subcultural capital 
they possess.

Compared to authentic sites of hip-hop production (e.g. basements, studios, 
bedrooms with recording set-ups, train platforms, and b-boy battles), fields such 
as schools and community centers (e.g. Dimitriadis, 2001) that are more closely 
tied to the domain of education are arguably not the best places to understand 
the ways that Black males are engaged in hip-hop processes (Kirkland, 2008). 
This is particularly the case when the goal is to understand contexts through 
first understanding the people. The social relations in schools and educational
domains differ from those of hip-hop. For even the most talented hip-hop cultural producer, the field of education will arguably never value his or her craft in the way that it is valued in the domain and field of hip-hop. Cultural capital mediates these social judgments and appraisals. Whereas teachers and adults hold cultural capital in schools, young Black males hold subcultural capital (Magaudda, 2009) in the field of hip-hop that educators do not have. For these reasons, we ask how might hip-hop production sites help us to understand how Black males learn on their own terms?

**Research problem**

Understanding the similarities and divergences of each respective Bourdieuan field (i.e. schools vs authentic hip-hop sites) in terms of potential for engagement begs that we look at what cultural production looks like to the actors in these respective fields. Specifically, why do some Black males persistently engage with hip-hop as labor while eschewing intense engagement with traditional and school-based educational processes? To answer this question, we turn to informal hip-hop labor to learn directly from Black males who commit their minds, bodies, and time to hip-hop production practices. In keeping with educational scholarship that seeks to disrupt deficit notions of marginalized “others” (Milner, 2008), this exploration of cultural production within the counter-cultural spaces of hip-hop offers important counter-narratives of Black males that interrupts, as does the work of others (Beachum & McCray, 2011; Harper & Davis III, 2012; Kelley, 1997), deficit notions of Black males as unmotivated underachievers. This research offers a different type of Black male representation within educational research. We focus on labor to draw attention to its importance in the current body of hip-hop based education and hip-hop studies where serious engagements with labor practices are nearly non-existent. We hope to broaden educators’ imaginations about the educational possibilities of hip-hop by exploring why Black males take it up as work. We present findings from in-depth interviews with 14 Black male hip-hop producers to answer the following research questions:

1. Why do some Black males decide to engage hip-hop cultural production in lieu of other more traditional labor opportunities?
2. What can schools learn from studying Black males’ engagement with hip-hop cultural production in non-school contexts and in more authentic hip-hop contexts?
Methods

Participants

We purposefully selected participants for this study by distributing an informational flyer about the purpose of this study at local hip-hop shows and organizational events as well as by contacting hip-hop record labels based in Philadelphia. Accomplished by the first author, who was also a frequent attendee at local hip-hop events, these efforts were likely viewed as typical kinds of networking that happens in many underground and local hip-hop communities where the lines between fan and participants are very thin (Harrison, 2010).

The following criteria guided participant selection: (a) participants must have lived in Philadelphia since age 14 to enable us to inquire about the educational system and work readiness; (b) participants must be of African descent; and (c) participants must be involved in some aspect of hip-hop production, labor, and income. These forms of labor included different performance roles such as rappers/MCs, DJs, and dancers but also other roles of hip-hop cultural production such as beat making, independent music label management, and studio ownership. This final criterion disallowed us from interviewing participants who might view hip-hop as a hobby rather than a source of labor. At the time of the study, all 14 final informants resided within the Philadelphia city limits and were thus affected by the various policies, structural changes, and overall environment of Philadelphia. Ranging from ages 20 to 42 ($M = 27.8$), the men had achieved a variety of educational levels including high school diploma or General Equivalency Degree to some post-secondary education. Table 1 describes the participants, their ages, and their hip-hop labor practices.

Despite a growing call for including student voice as a means of informing school decision-making, it remains true that school leaders are more willing to seriously consider the perspectives of adults over those of children and youth, especially marginalized youth. Adult allies are particularly important for marginalized students such as Black males. We use the experiences and reflections of adults to make suggestions about the ways that schools can make formal education more appealing for young Black males. We believe that each participant has much to offer, because they are Black men who each experienced K-12 schooling in a large inner-city (some left before completing). They are distanced enough from their experiences to offer clear reflections on their educational experiences, to understand the costs and benefits of their involvement with hip-hop, and were candid about the importance of hip-hop in their lives without feeling the need to downplay the significance of hip-hop in their lives or play up
the importance of formal education. Finally, individuals are hip-hop cultural producers that many school-aged youth look to as teachers and mentors and that schools (as will be explored) are more frequently calling on for the purposes of implementing hip-hop based education projects (Irby & Hall, 2011; Irby, Hall, & Hill, 2013).

**Data collection and analysis**

The primary means of data collection for this study was in-depth participant interviews (Creswell, 1998) and observer participation. Interviews consisted of a series of open-ended questions designed to understand the decision-making processes and life events that compelled participants to choose hip-hop as a source of labor. All interviews were conducted with individuals (and often in the presence of their “crews”) in their preferred fields of production, including in-home studios, apartments, during graffiti walks, and at visual art studios. Formal audio-recorded interviews ranged from one and one-half hours to two and one-half hours and were guided by the following questions:

1. Why did you choose to invest in hip-hop as a career?
2. How did you get involved?
3. What has your experience been?
4. What are the other options for employment/what would you be doing without hip-hop?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Hip-hop labor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Andrae</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>Studio Owner, Beat Maker, Producer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corey</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>DJ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dwayne</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>CEO of Record Company, MC, Producer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gerald</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>MC/Musician</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jamie</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>B-Boy, Dance Instructor, Magazine Founder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jason</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Hip Hop Visual Concepts, DJ, Musician</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jermaine</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>MC/Musician</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jordan</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Record Label A&amp;R, Manager, Promoter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kareem</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Beat Maker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marc</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>MC, Hip-Hop Personality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mohammed</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>MC/Musician</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shannon</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>DJ, Beat Maker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tommy</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>MC/Musician</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>William</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>MC/Musician</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5. What do you expect to gain from hip-hop?
6. How do hip-hoppers feel about opportunity/upward mobility in society?
7. What is your educational experience?
8. What has your experience in the formal labor market been?
9. How do you feel hip-hop benefits inner-city communities?

Initial coding of interview transcriptions focused on general characteristics of participants. As educational experiences and opportunities are directly connected to labor, we also sought general information about participants’ educational experiences as relevant. After identifying the general profiles of participants, we used constant comparative coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to capture the factors that pushed participants out of formal labor and the pull factors that drew them to hip-hop. We continued with coding procedures until reaching the point of saturation. Expectedly, given the strong connection between education and labor, schooling experiences emerged as a substantive factor in each participant’s narrative.

Results

As hip-hop in this study was a means of cultural production and labor, at some level, all participants engaged in hip-hop for financial income. However, this should not be confused with desiring celebrity status or extreme wealth through hip-hop, as hip-hop culture and the music industry are distinctly different fields. In these respective fields, hip-hop cultural producers engage in ongoing struggles over production processes to maintain (sub)cultural capital and benefit within the market of creative, musical, intellectual, performative, and material culture that is hip-hop. Within these struggles, participants chose hip-hop as a labor source for two specific reasons: (1) it offered them freedom to control themselves and their products and (2) it offered them a sense of pride from being involved in something important, positive, and bigger than themselves. We discuss these two themes below.

Can I live? Freedom to control self, processes, and products

Freedom to control self, products, and processes were key characteristics that made participants to choose hip-hop as a form of labor. When participants decided to pursue hip-hop as a career, they reached a level of autonomy that
most of them were unable to attain in the formal labor market jobs. They enjoyed freedom of creativity and were unbound to corporate instituted guidelines and workplace culture. As a result, they became more comfortable, as they worked with and among individuals who shared the same passion and understanding for hip-hop that they did. “Everybody preaches to you, ‘get a job that you like to have fun with,’” Marc explained. “Rapping seemed to be doing that for me. So I said rapping is what’s gonna save me.”

The instances in which this freedom becomes most apparent are when participants must navigate the line between their independent status outside of corporate entities and recording contracts with major record labels that would pay for living expenses, recording, tours, and distribution of their music. When contractual agreements enter the picture, there is the potential to lose the autonomy that so many of participants desired. Gerald explained that this is why he chose an independent record label as opposed to a major label:

I like the creative control man, the freedom... At majors, you don’t really got no freedom man. They got a 50 year-old white man from the suburbs telling you how to make hip-hop records. I’m not feeling that at all. Like, don’t tell me how to make no records man. Don’t offend me like that.

The potential for the loss of creativity and control was a serious issue among participants. All of them were adamant about maintaining control of the musical and cultural production as well as themselves and their talents as producers of hip-hop. Gerald made this point particularly clear while discussing his decision to stay independent:

I knew this is what I wanted to do. This is what I knew I could do without a flaw. And it gives the benefit to be independent at the same time and work for myself and start to establish things on my own instead of going over here to this corporate gig or whatever the case may be and working my ass off pretty much for nothing.

In instances such as these, participants underscored the importance they placed on having control over their own materials and products while attempting to garner income from hip-hop. Despite the caution that participants exercised when navigating corporate deals, there were times when they found themselves in situations that were too restrictive and confining. In order to maintain the degrees of freedom and control that initially drew them to the work, they made significant changes. Shannon illustrated one such example while discussing a lucrative DJ gig that he held at a club. The club owners were two Italian men who initially took no interest in the hip-hop events that were taking place in the club. This lack of interest enabled Shannon and his promotional partner (a friend of his) the freedom to shape the night how they pleased with their creative
talents. They enjoyed this freedom from the owners until the venue became tremendously popular and business significantly increased:

I was having an argument with the owners, ‘cause we actually ran that club for them. All they did was pick the money up. Me and my man pretty much ran that club, did everything. You know what I mean? [We] set the parties up, went out and promotions, brought in artists ... we were running this club. I mean ... they said “this is your club. This ya’ll club,” but they weren’t paying us properly and we had an argument and after that I was like, “I can’t do this no more. ‘Cause hip-hop, this DJing hip-hop shit is not fun anymore.” So from there, I was like fuck it... The money got involved and the money took away from the fun and the art, and I felt as though I was being like, programmed.

Shannon’s reflection on this period illustrates how the freedom to keep his hip-hop labor “fun” and essentially on his own terms actually took precedence over the monetary benefits of the job. Although he suggested that not being paid properly contributed to his departure, his remarks about “the fun and the art” being taken away and feeling like he was being “programmed” underscored the importance of freedom and control of his own experience and product. In essence, his explanation illustrates how seriously the ability to be in control is for many Black men and why they might opt away from formal labor. When hip-hop began to share characteristics with the formal labor market, it lost the distinctiveness that allowed Shannon to be in control, have fun, and make money all at the same time.

Jason, a visual artist who creates hip-hop inspired designs, also spoke to the importance of control and authority. Jason could have easily applied his skills as a visual artist in a corporate environment and thus enjoyed a more stable income compared to his fluctuating and relatively unstable income through hip-hop. When asked why he was willing to continue working in hip-hop, without hesitation, he enumerated the following three reasons:

1. I wouldn’t be making as big money as the corporation would be making.
2. I would not have complete control over what I’m doing, because I would be working for someone else. Me and authority don’t get along too well.
3. It’s not their shit. You know what I mean. I would feel some kind of way. I would feel like a whore, basically. I would feel as if I’m whoring out my services.

Jason’s reasons reinforce the element of control over one’s products that other participants also cited. However, Jason also introduced the idea of what one’s labor contributes to and how that makes one feel. By remarking that he would “feel like a whore” exercising his talents in a corporate environment, Jason acknowledged that gaining a sense of worth, while having freedom of control
is also important. That is, one could have freedom and control over one’s labor, but gaining a sense of worth is also important. This phenomenon – the larger sense of meaning that one gets from cultural production – is the focus of the following section.

It’s bigger than hip-hop: being a part of something important

In addition to freedom and control, hip-hop offered Black males a sense of pride and importance, because they felt they were a part of something larger than themselves that was positive and empowering. One way that this happens is when interest in one aspect of hip-hop, such as rapping, grows into a fuller understanding of hip-hop, its rich history, and related positions in community environments where Black men can have a positive influence on younger people through hip-hop. Jermaine illustrated this progression clearly. He discussed how he started attending church and joined a Christian rap group. “I started doing Gospel rap,” he explained, in part because of the influence of another rapper in his church. Inspired, Jermaine began learning more about the history of hip-hop and the other elements such as dance, graffiti, and DJing in addition to emceeing. His understanding of hip-hop as a cultural phenomenon with a rich history expanded. This led to working at a hip-hop based after school program at an elementary school that focused on scholastic achievement and motivation. In this way, engaging with hip-hop as cultural production expanded well beyond the kinds of activities participants discussed in the previous section. Like them, Jermaine desired income, but this cultural production also enabled him to be in a position of influence in his community.

Other men were put into similarly empowering positions through hip-hop and felt strongly about doing something positive for the community that simultaneously garnered income. Marc explained this point and how many other labor settings do not offer opportunities for this larger sense of purpose.

I can always make money off corporate America. That will always be a job, but there’s not always gonna be an example [for younger generations]. If I can do that and it gives my life some meaning and inspires some other people, it’s worth it. Why not? ...I have power. I feel like I should use it for good. [But] people are not going to pay attention to me if I do it through corporate America.

As Marc explained, having an income and being in a position to inspire other people is a pull to hip-hop. In fact, he recognized that exercising his influence through “corporate America” might actually undermine the influence that he
can have on younger generations. Since being in such an influential position is important, he would sacrifice a corporate job for it. For William, leaving the formal labor market and being unemployed motivated him to pursue hip-hop as a source of income and galvanize his rap group. He used his unemployment check to finance a single that would result in several shows, write ups in the paper, and exposure. Understanding how difficult it is to succeed in hip-hop, he used his status as an artist to influence youth to participate in formal labor and to be in control of their labor within the formal economy:

When we speak at schools and stuff, we just got a deal to do that, I want to be able to go to these children and say listen, “You don’t always have to do the rhyme thing. You don’t have to look at it as your only option like, ‘Damn, if I can’t rhyme, I gotta hustle.’ No. Here goes something else for you.”

Even though hip-hop was Williams’s primary source of income, he used this position to encourage youth about different labor options outside of hip-hop.

Hip-hop afforded some men the position to influence younger generations, and for others, it afforded them a sense that they were a part of something larger and important in society. One example of this came from Andrae, who was a small-time beat maker. Andrae reflected upon the growth of hip-hop from a street culture that most people in mainstream America thought was a fad to a multi-billion dollar industry and an enormous part of American and popular culture. Even as a just a local, small-time producer, engaging in the cultural production of hip-hop afforded him the opportunity to interact with legendary super-producers such as Jimmy Jam at professional settings.

At this point, I’m still making little beats on cassettes and stuff. He [Jimmy Jam] spoke to me like I was a contemporary. We talked and I asked him a couple of questions and he spoke. And he’ll probably never remember that, but to this day I remember it, ‘cause it made me think I can do this. I’m just like him or he’s just like me. But hip-hop was so powerful at that time, because the [hip-hop] music ... was changing the world. I saw the clothes. I saw the commercials. I saw everything changing. Every time a car was in a video, I saw it in the street. And I realized how big it was really getting at that time and I knew that I wanted to be a part of it.

In an instance such as this, Andrae reflected on wanting to be a part of something big, influential, and important. He referenced the influence that hip-hop has had on fashion, marketing, and the kind of cars people purchase. It was empowering to him that he could have even a small part in this culture, and through it, be accepted as a peer to a professional such as Jimmy Jam.

Not only could Andrae be a part of the hip-hop industry, but because of his grassroots level involvement, he also had an advantage over anyone who did
not identify with the *lingua franca* of hip-hop culture. Because of this, he was invited to be the director of urban music at a major music conference held annually in Philadelphia. As director, he changed the way business was handled. He did things “the hip-hop way”: informally and affordably. Additionally, he was able to effectively communicate the expectations and make the “urban music” component of the conference became a great success. His experience helped him identify the opportunity to turn his favorite pastime into a career: “It was at that point that a lot of people [hip-hop artists] really needed services that I can provide... They just didn’t have no place to go within their price range.” Soon after, he used his grandfather’s abandoned tailor shop located next door to his home to build a studio.

One final instance of feeling empowerment through hip-hop cultural production came from Jamie. As a b-boy, Jamie combined his dance with business knowledge to begin teaching dance classes in the Philadelphia. However, what started as dance classes grew into a magazine in both online and print forms. He gained enough credibility to sponsor other entrepreneurial and community-building hip-hop and alternative culture activities that otherwise would not have come to fruition. The progression from teaching dance classes, to establishing a magazine, to organizing creative spaces for young people was deeply meaningful for him.

I felt like yo, this is powerful. People wanted to learn to dance [breakdance] and they would see me do it... I said wait a second. If I can make a living off of this, I’ll try it. I got some flyers made up, just word of mouth. Heads [people] heard about it, next thing you know I was teaching ... [and] 15 people showed up. You know, they paid like $60.00. So I was like damn! People signed up out front for an 8 week class. They signed a contract. I went to a business school. The price kept going up and going up. The last one I did there was 25 people, $130.00 a pop up front. You know, that’s a lot of money for teaching two hours a week worth of dance. That’s pretty much how I got started. It was great. When I left [my job], and started dancing more and training more and teaching, it was great. It was like, I’m home, this is it. This is what I’ve been waiting for. My whole life changed. Everything changed.

From this point, Jamie created a website to advertise his classes, but decided to incorporate local hip-hop news to keep patrons coming back to the website. With the news updates, the site evolved into an online magazine. He then developed a plan, sought sponsors, and made a transition from online to print in a two-month period. He now works with the magazine primarily, the dance classes second, and at an after school program for about 10 h a week at a private school. He teaches dance and helps with homework for elementary school students. All of these efforts also enabled him to develop a venue that would allow him to host monthly dance events for young people in the community.
Because of this progression of events, starting to teach dance literally did “change everything” for Jamie. It provided him with a stable income, but it also enabled him to be a part of something much bigger than himself that would have a positive influence in Philadelphia and on younger generations.

**Discussion and implications**

As illustrated through the counter-narratives of Black males in our study, hip-hop requires substantial intellectual, creative, and physical labor to produce desirable outcomes. Educators have much to learn from the counter-stories about why Black males are motivated to labor within hip-hop, even with its ambiguous promise of concrete returns. How can schools improve the delivery of education to Black males by learning the motivations behind the intense engagement of Black males who commit their labor to hip-hop? What exists in hip-hop cultural production – as a domain and as a field of production – that is lacking in schooling?

Our research illustrates that Black males in this study were drawn to hip-hop cultural production for two primary reasons. First, it offered them freedom to control themselves and their products. Second, it afforded them a sense that they were a part of something larger and more important than themselves. Importantly, it also offers insights into what does not motivate them. Contrary to mainstream depictions of hip-hop as a materialistic culture of conspicuous consumption, our findings indicate that the prospect of immediate and long-term wealth accumulations matters less to Black men compared to how the culture is depicted in the mainstream. The decision to leave stable employment options to pursue hip-hop underscores the participants’ beliefs. Understanding these motivations and aspirations to engage in labor-intensive activities helps us unpack what it is that motivates Black males generally and holds implications for educators interested in improving the education of Black males.

**Importance of creativity and autonomy**

Our findings suggest that hip-hop offered participants autonomy, framed as a relative sense of creative control, over their labor. Nearly every participant in this study discussed creativity and autonomy as central to their decision to engage in hip-hop labor practices. They also described a lack of autonomy and creative control as a factor that pushes Black men out of formal labor.
The field of hip-hop as described by participants also contained ample opportunities for collaborations and social relationships with other Black males. In other words, in the midst of their creativity and autonomy, Black males were most frequently laboring together. This was the case in music production studios, through running successful events, and while networking in professional settings. In schools, these characteristics of collaboration, social relationships, and even sense of community have been characterized as elements of culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995) and effective practice for African American college students (Gallien & Peterson, 2005; Petchauer, 2007). More globally, these characteristics, as well as affect and harmony, have been identified as characteristics of learning environments (i.e. fields) that are supportive for many African American students (Hale-Benson, 1986; Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003; Rovai, Gallien, & Wighting, 2005).

These findings must be seen in context with the body of scholarship that has identified Black males at or near the bottom of every educational measurement (e.g. Noguera, 2003; Reed, 1988). In the current era of school reform, the mantras of “no excuses” and “getting tough” guide the policies and practices at many schools that Black males attend. In fact, school reformers frequently posit these mantras as the primary means – if not the only means – to raise test achievement levels for schools populated by Black males (see Teach for America’s framework as one example, Farr, 2010). These policies and practices result in less freedom, control, autonomy, and creativity for Black males (and other students of color) in virtually every single dimension of their daily school lives. Curricular options narrow, opportunities to collaborate vanish, and assessments formats for demonstrating mastery are singular. In extreme examples, teachers (often mandated by school leaders with little educational training) require complete silence in classrooms and halls and for students to request permission for even the smallest liberty such as sharpening a pencil. In other words, what is often employed as the primary means to improve the schooling of Black males is in direct conflict with the findings of our study.

Given this conflict, the comparatively low achievement of Black males on subject area tests (Noguera, 2008) and reading (NAEP, 2004) as well as their high remediation (Fashola, 2005; Milofsky, 1974) should be of little surprise. The schooling fields in which these bleak outcomes have taken shape are antithetical to the hip-hop labor field in which participants of this study thrived. As we stop short of making formulaic recommendations, this conflict should cause educators to consider whether curricula and classroom practices foster or stifle opportunities for autonomy and creativity. These opportunities do not necessarily mean that Black males must engage in hip-hop cultural production in educational spaces, although there are successful school models of this (e.g.
Seidel, 2010). As we have suggested throughout this article, not all Black males engage with hip-hop to the degree that the ones in this article do. Moreover, hip-hop is not the sole avenue to creativity and control for Black males. Rather, educators must devise ways for a broad spectrum of Black males to have creativity and control in education beyond hip-hop (Kirkland, 2011a).

Actually, it’s not all about the Benjamins (i.e. Money)

Financial gain was not a strong enough motivator to keep many of the males in this study engaged in the formal economy. Yet, our data provide no compelling evidence that informal labor such as the “long hours in recording studios” or “the concrete and legitimate employment options” to which Kitwana (2002) referred actually produces significant material or financial gains for participants either. In fact, many participants decided to pursue hip-hop even when they knew they would experience less economic stability compared with participating in formal labor. Shannon, for example, walked away from a steady-paying gig at a local nightclub, because he lost creative control and autonomy of the production event. His decision to control the conditions of his labor and willingness to attend to his emotional well being (i.e. feeling programmed, not fun) point to the need to understand the nuances of why Black males do or do not commit to particular types of labor under particular conditions.

Schooling is typically the most labor-intensive activity that young people experience in the United States. Too often Black males expend significant energies toward earning a high school diploma from schools that feed into regional labor markets that are indifferent and even hostile to their work and life aspirations (Darity, 1994; Waldinger & Lichter, 2003). To be clear, Black males who hold high school diplomas do better over the life course than their Black male counterparts who do not; yet Black males, by way of comparison to other ethnic or racial groups, do not fare better in terms of earnings, employment, or numerous other quality of life indicators (Schwartzman, 1997; Stoll, 1998). But this is of little consequence if Black males who, from their perspectives, are do not always rely on the prospects of financial return to make decisions about how they put their minds and bodies to work.

The implications of these findings suggest that schools must move beyond workforce development and preparation credos in educational spaces. Simply put, the age-old school adage that “you need to get an education to get a job” is of little persuasion to young people given what we know from a cultural production perspective. The commitment to “schooling for work” narrative may push away Black males who operate in a domain where their subcultural
capital is at least in part based on “keeping it real.” This means that educators must acknowledge that financial gain is only a partial motivator and that the labor of education is not “all about the Benjamins.” Offering counter-narratives and engaging in truth-telling practices that critically consider the real employment prospects for Black males is important for educators who wish to sell Black males on the importance of formal education.

Our data illustrate that amidst bleak prospects for employment, many of those who found opportunities in formal labor markets opted out to formally engage in hip-hop cultural production in underground (i.e. informal) urban economies (Kelley, 1997; Kitwana, 2002). In schools, especially ones in low-performing districts, clear school-to-work pipelines have all but dissipated. Even with good educational experiences, school, like formal jobs, may be unlikely to maintain the imagination and labor of Black males who see schools not necessarily in oppositional terms, but rather as not aligned with their ways of being and doing. To encourage school engagement, the importance of schooling must be framed in a more authentic way that promises (and works toward) offering autonomy, opportunities for creativity, and the opportunity to be a part of something bigger than the school.

Conclusions

Hip-hop provides a space where Black males consistently perform well (Kirkland, 2008; Low, 2010; Sanchez, 2010). Hip-hop works for many Black male youth in U.S. schools in similar ways that the shop floor works for the lads in Willis’ (1982) seminal text *Learning to Labor*. Through the opportunity to labor somewhere, the lads produced their own cultural identity that focused on affinity for work and opposition to school. As the lads understood their position within the world vis-à-vis their understandings of limited opportunities formal education offered, their choices reinforced their class position, affording them few opportunities to improve their lot in life. The important takeaway here is that they exercised agency within the set of conditions in which they found themselves. Black males in our study do the same, and in many cases, their decisions undermined their ability achieve the desirable outcomes that public school educators might aspire for Black males: upward mobility. Yet most of the study participants did not regret their choices.

For teachers and educators, our findings highlight the importance of understanding students’ lives outside of school where they are already engaged. For a long time, educators have understood this general point about showing care and
interest in students’ lives outside of the classroom setting. This is implied throughout, but our larger point is that there are important lessons for school engagement in these other sites. From this study, we know that the sites of cultural production for Black males, not limited to hip-hop, also hold such promise. For educational researchers broadly and hip-hop-based educational researchers specifically, the study encourages scholars to look more closely at the everyday lives of Black males with a focus on their successes in domains that matter and offer them status. When educators acknowledge and honor that Black males are agents working within larger structures, then educators will better understand Black males’ educational, work, and life aspirations. Similarly, hip-hop must be recognized as a legitimate site of labor (not necessarily employment) that puts Black males to work rather than as cultural texts alone.

Shifts such as these encourage educators and scholars to value the individuals who produce culture and the means by which they produce it over the cultural products. It asks educators to understand Black males on their own terms. By this, we mean understanding Black males in the fields in which they live, create, and labor and in the domains that offer them a sense of worth and belonging. Efforts to engage Black males in education that do not have these as imperative starting points or that start with hip-hop as texts only will lack a critical element that holds the potential to engage Black males in educational spaces.

References


