

Philadelphia Inquirer

Wed, May. 07, 2003

Reading, Writing, Rapping

Hip-hop's going from the top of the charts to the head of the class, even into Scholastic children's books. Teachers are using it as a learning tool - sometimes on the sly.

By Elizabeth Wellington
Inquirer Staff Writer

Rap's in the lesson plan at Talley Middle School in Claymont, Del., where students make up a record label, keep budgets, and write rap rhymes. Kevin Barnes, 15, holds lyrics for Darayia Wilson, 14.

The beats seeping out of Room 214 suck Talley Middle School students down the hallway. It's first period: microsociety class.

The Delaware eighth graders' assignment: to compose a rap around the theme "Achievement Matters." They shake their cornrowed heads as they write. This is right up their alley.

Here, they polish reading, writing and math skills by running a make-believe record label. Their rhymes are written in stanzas; they learn about budgets and use

high-tech music equipment to earn grades.

Which makes Jennifer Bishop's hip-hop-infused class the bomb.

"I think it's better than all the other classes I'm taking," said Michael Hurtt, 13, of Wilmington, whose rap name is Miraculous. "It challenges me. It's helping me... use similes and metaphors. Bigger words. You learn how not to include just the basic words when you talk."

Such enthusiasm is why educators, publishers such as Scholastic, and entertainers are using hip-hop to teach school-age youngsters the fundamentals. They're taking hip-hop's best - the catchy beats, clever use of words, and social messages - and leaving its overuse of sex and materialism to the

airwaves and sold-out rap concerts.

The movement is at the grassroots level, so the day when 50 Cent or Lauryn Hill replaces Greek mythology in high school English classes is far off, said Ernest Morrell, coauthor of "Promoting Academic Literacy With Urban Youth Through Engaging Hip-Hop Culture," an article published by the National Association of English Teachers.

But if you peek into classrooms across the country, he says, you'll find a smattering of educators using rap to introduce the alphabet. Elementary schools are using it as a mnemonic device that helps students memorize multiplication tables and history.

Some high school teachers are even pulling lyrics from popular artists to help students build reading-comprehension skills. The idea is that a 14-year-old would rather dissect the meaning of Jay-Z's "Excuse Me, Miss" than Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream.

"Hip-hop is a vehicle through which school concepts can make sense," said Meacham Shuaib, assistant professor of literacy education at the University of Delaware, who shows teachers in the state how to blend hip-hop into their curriculums.

"Without engagement, you can't connect students to skills so that they want to learn," Shuaib said. "Hip-hop grabs them off the bat."

A lot of things are behind hip-hop's move into the classroom. The obvious reason is that elements of the genre - its slang, fashion and message - are a part of pop culture, from television to political campaigns.

But it's also because hip-hop's earliest fans are slipping into teaching, administration and even political offices that decide how children learn. Detroit Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick, 31, virtually ran on a hip-hop platform. And last month, Kilpatrick held the country's largest hip-hop

summit to date, during which rap mogul Russell Simmons suggested that teachers use hip-hop instead of shunning it.

Hollywood music producer Karyn Rachtman, 39, launched a series of children's books penned by rappers last year, published by Scholastic Inc. Rachtman was a teenager in the early days of rap, when it was all about the house party. The series, called "Hip Kid Hop," includes four books written by LL Cool J, Shaggy, Kevy Kev and Doug E. Fresh. Eve and Common are scheduled to release books later this year.

These parable-style stories are written by hip-hop's biggest names and have Scholastic's large bankroll behind them, so they've managed to get validity in the children's book world, unlike some previous efforts by smaller publishing houses. So far, Rachtman said, 200,000 CDs have been pressed to go with the books.

"It's a natural fit," said Rachtman, who has two children. "If you look at what records are selling, which books are selling, what's going on on Madison Avenue, hip-hop is the one thing that reaches all kids."

Despite the genre's reputation for sexual lyrics, male braggadocio and

materialism, songs like this are climbing Billboard's charts:

I know I can. (I know I can.)

Be what I wanna be. (Be what I wanna be.)

If I work hard at it. (If I work hard at it.)

I'll be where I want to be. (I'll be where I wanna be.)

That's from rapper Nas' latest single, "I Can." The infectious hook, sampled from Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, is No. 9 on Billboard's rhythm-and-blues air-play charts. The lyrics tell school-age children to pick their friends wisely and to take their time growing up. Start singing it in any park, and a young chorus will trail behind you.

Jerry L. Barrow, music editor of Source magazine, said a handful of rappers are becoming active because they see the effect their music has on youth. Jaheim's "Fabulous" and Talib Kweli's "Get By" are also at the top of the charts with their sing-song message for young people.

"[Nas] is trying to undo the damage he did with all of his flossing [bragging] over the last couple of albums," Barrow said. "It's a way for him to be more in touch without being cheesy."

But not everyone is quick to embrace the genre's redeeming qualities.

The "Hip Kid Hop" books apparently are selling well at bookstores, but they are not placed next to traditional children's books such as *Goodnight Moon*. Instead, they are grouped with books of African American interest, right next to adult love stories.

"Most people have a resistance to it because all they see are gangstas and guns," Rachtman said. "How can you say that? That's like saying all poetry is about violence."

School systems have been slow to grab on, as well. Those that do are reluctant to share their results, for fear of disapproval.

"We found that teachers are using pieces of the [hip-hop] lifestyle in the classroom in their own way. But they are not letting their school boards know because they are afraid their superiors won't approve," said Kelly Quintero, coauthor of *"Shades of Literacy: Hip-Hop as Authentic Poetry,"* also published last year by the National Association of English Teachers.

Still, there are a few classrooms across the United States and locally where hip-hop has made cameo appearances, said

Dennis Creedon, an administrator in the Philadelphia school system's Office of Creative and Performing Arts.

At a Northeast Philadelphia school, a teacher taught his students a rap to help them with the era from the Revolutionary War to the Civil War, Creedon said. And last year, then-Wanamaker Middle School music teacher Virginia Lamb turned Mozart's *The Magic Flute* into a hip-hopera.

"Children understand this culture, and this gets their attention," Creedon said. "Still, we have to be aware what kind of music they are listening to, because music enters our consciousness on a deeper level."

At the Talley school in Claymont, Del., students look as if they just stepped out of a rap video - baggy T-shirts, Afros bouncing in sweatbands, britches slung low around the hips, retro sneakers. So you know they can relate to this.

Bishop's class started working on its rap label in September. Since then, she said, she has seen her students' writing skills improve. They can master music equipment, and most important, they are excited about learning. Writing the grant application to secure \$5,000 from J.P. Morgan for

the studio equipment was worth it, Bishop said.

At the end of the school year, the class will produce a six-song CD that includes tunes the students wrote about writer's block, poverty, and the struggles of being a middle-schooler.

Within minutes of getting their assignment Monday morning, the first group comes up with an Ashanti-style hook:

You can achieve it....

All you got to do is believe it.

Kevin Barnes, 15, isn't having the same kind of luck with lyrics. While his friends are tapping their feet to the beat as they write, Kevin is stuck.

"I really got writer's block," he said, shaking his head. "I just can't make this happen. I got so much stuff in my head. I can't put it on paper."

He walks to the stairwell. Within 15 minutes, his notebook is filled with tiny handwriting. He grabs the mike, and just like Brooklyn-born rapper Notorious B.I.G., he starts to flow.

It's KO the kid.
Achievement's the bid

Never ever lost a battle.
Cause I'm in it to win

Cuz I step to the plate. With
the bat as my mate.

And the other teams say.
That fat boy's in shape.

Cuz I'm achieving. Coke and
drugs I'm leaving.

In the car, I'm speeding

And I'm still achieving.

Contact staff writer
Elizabeth Wellington at 215-
854-2704 or
ewellington@phillynews.com