

**Doing-Hip-Hop in the Transformation of Youth Identities:
Social Class, Habitus, and Cultural Capital**

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1. A Theoretical Preamble: Cultural Capital, Habitus, Structure, and Agency

Cultural capital is a concept from Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1973, 1977, 1984, 1991; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) referring to language use, skills, and orientations, dispositions, attitudes, and schemes of perception (also called *habitus*) that a child is endowed with by virtue of socialization in her/his family and community. Bourdieu's argument is that children of the socioeconomic elite are bestowed by their familial socialization with both more and the right kind of cultural capital for school success (i.e., their habitus becomes their cultural capital in the social field of the school). A recurrent theme in Bourdieu's works is that children from disadvantaged groups, with a habitus incompatible with that presupposed in school, are not competing with equal starting points with children of the socioeconomic elite and thus experience the reproduction of social stratification.

As both Skeggs (2008) and Block (this volume) point out, the notion of social class has not received enough attention in the recent literature on globalization and identity research. While Bourdieu has sometimes been accused of being a theorist of reproduction rather than transformation (e.g., Jenkins, 1992; Canagarajah, 1993), both Luke (2009) and Block (this volume) remark that Bourdieu's concept of habitus does allow for the possibility of transformation, and Bourdieu seems to have managed to find a way between structural determinism and an over-emphasis on individual agency. Giddens (1984)'s structuration theory also seems to provide a solution to overcome the sociological macro-micro, structure-agency theoretical divide by seeing the macro and micro, social structures and agency, as mutually constitutive and shaping. Giddens (1984) sees social action and interaction as tacitly enacted social practices and discusses how they become institutions or routines and reproduce familiar forms of social life:

The basic domain of study of the social sciences, according to the theory of structuration, is neither the experience of the individual actor, nor the existence of any form of social totality, but social practices ordered across space and time. Human social activities, like some self-reproducing items in nature, are recursive. That is to say, they are not brought into being by social actors but continually recreated by them via the very means whereby they express themselves *as* actors. In and through their activities agents reproduce the conditions that make these activities possible. (Giddens, 1984, p. 2).

With structuration theory, Giddens attempts to integrate human social action with the larger systems, structures, and institutions of which we are a part. It is the continual repetition of social action and interaction in more or less routines or repeated practices that constitute what may appear to be the larger social forms or systems. Under structuration theory, structure is not outside of and imposed on social action, but is both constituted/structured by and shaping/structuring social action. This is in line with Bourdieu's notion of habitus, which is postulated as a 'structuring structure' (see Block's delineation, this volume).

Both Bourdieu's theory and Giddens' structuration theory thus seem to converge in helping to overcome the structuralist determinism that is sometimes attributed to studies which emphasize too much the reproduction tendency of social structures (e.g., Willis, 1980). Precisely because structures and social actions are seen as mutually constitutive and shaping or structuring, there is the possibility of transformation of social structures (such as habitus) through creative, situated social actions. However, this kind of creative agency is not to be over-celebrated as it does not happen easily. In this chapter we tell of the attempts of some education researchers to use an innovative hip hop programme to help change the habitus of some children in a secondary school situated in a working class residential area in Hong Kong, and how the project met with both shares of success and difficulties. In the following sections, we shall outline the setting, the programme, and our findings. In the concluding section, we discuss what we have learnt that might help us to achieve more success if we are to embark on a similar project in the future.

2. Hong Kong: The Setting of the Story

Despite its international cosmopolitan appearance, Hong Kong is ethnically rather homogeneous. Over 90% of its population is ethnic Chinese, and Cantonese is the mother tongue of the majority. English native speakers account for a small proportion of the entire population. They had constituted the privileged class of the society until July 1, 1997 when Hong Kong's sovereignty was returned to China and Hong Kong became a Special Administrative Region (SAR) of China. The English-conversant bilingual Chinese middle class has, however, remained the socioeconomically dominant group in Hong Kong.

Notwithstanding its being the mother tongue of only a minority, English has been the language of educational and socioeconomic advancement; that is, the dominant symbolic resource in the symbolic market (Bourdieu, 1991) in Hong Kong. Even in the post-1997/colonial era, English has remained a socioeconomically dominant language in Hong Kong society. For instance, English remains the medium of instruction in most universities and professional training programmes.

It can be seen that the symbolic market is embodied and enacted in the many key situations (e.g., educational and job settings) in which symbolic resources (e.g., certain types of linguistic skills, cultural knowledge, specialized knowledge and skills) are demanded of social actors if they want to gain access to valuable social, educational and eventually material resources (Bourdieu, 1991). For instance, a Hong Kong student must have adequate English resources to enter and succeed in the English-medium professional training programmes and in order to earn the qualifications to enter high-income professions. Hence, access to English in schooling acts as a crucial gatekeeper for socio-economic mobility and helps to reproduce class structures in Hong Kong. However,

such access has been constrained by a number of factors, including government legislation in 1998 that reduced the number of English-medium public schools, as well as the varying quality of English instruction in both English-medium and Chinese-medium schools (Evans, 2008; Lin, 2000). Public secondary schools in Hong Kong are generally classified into three bands that are based on competitive entry requirements. Band 1 schools admit the approximately top 33% of primary school leavers, Band 2 schools admit the middle 33%, and Band 3 schools admits the lowest 33%. The banding label has been criticized but it has been a well-established administrative fact of the Hong Kong schooling system. This chapter tells the story of a hip hop project piloted in a Band 3 school located in a working class housing complex in a rural area in Hong Kong. We focus on the ways in which hip hop in English provided working class students with new spaces (or, in Bourdieu's terms, a new habitus) for developing their identities as English speakers.

3. Piloting an English Language Teaching (ELT) Rap Project

We invented the name ELT rap to indicate to school principals and educational funding bodies that it is a kind of hip hop rap adapted or written for English language teaching (ELT) purposes. Working with a team of English language educators in the Faculty of Education at The Chinese University of Hong Kong from 2006 to 2008, we designed the project as an innovative way of drawing on youth popular cultural resources for English language education.

The linguist, Geneva Smitherman, has highlighted eight features of signification (i.e., meaning-making) in rap lyrics:

1. Indirection, circumlocution

2. Metaphorical-imagistic
3. Humorous, ironic
4. Rhythmic fluence and sound
5. Teachy but not preachy
6. Directed at person or persons usually present in the situational context
7. Punning, play on words
8. Introduction of the semantically or logically unexpected

(cited in Perry, 2004, p. 62)

A glance at the list will show that when adapted, rap has great potential in English language teaching. The rhythmic nature of rap lyrics facilitates the acquisition of the stress-timed rhythm of English. This has special significance in Hong Kong, where the majority of learners speak Cantonese, a syllable-timed language, as their mother-tongue. The play on words that is often a part of rap has great appeal for students when they repeat raps for practice. The rhyming nature of rap lyrics can also heighten learners' phonetic skills and phonological awareness, and practice rapping has the potential to build confidence among these students as English language users.

Why is ELT Rap potentially appealing to young people?

In English language education, jazz chants, (e.g. Graham, 2000), have been some of the activities advocated for improving learners' pronunciation, especially in terms of rhythm and intonation. ELT Rap differs from jazz chants in that it has a much richer musical dimension that appeals to young people: the rhythm is provided by hip hop music in the

background. This popular, musical, dimension should make ELT rap especially appealing to teenage students since it is infused in the popular culture that they consume on a daily basis.

In addition to the entertainment element, what can also attract teenage students to ELT rap is its content: rap is a channel for (young) people to speak out, to unload their personal worries and frustrations, and to speak to and against scenarios of social injustice (Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2002; Rose, 1994). The use of rap as a vehicle for voicing one's frustrations or concerns about social problems has been well-documented in rap around the world (cf. Alim, 2006; Mitchell, 2001), but little has been explored with regard to the context of Hong Kong. Given that social class divisions in Hong Kong are often shaped by access to English through education, rap in English became an appealing prospect for connecting to working class students in Hong Kong's secondary schools. Disassociated from the English of their classrooms, ELT rap had the potential to offer them new avenues for creative expression. We developed the project with the idea that many students would find in ELT Rap a space to reconcile their mixed feelings about English: on the one hand they understand the importance of English to their future; on the other hand, they resent the sense of frustration brought by their perceived inability to master a foreign language that is deemed so necessary for socio-economic mobility.

What is an emcee? - Building positive English speaker identities among Hong Kong teenagers

The title of our ELT Rap lyrics booklet used in the project is: "*The Young Emcee Scrolls*". This title is modeled on the trendy title of the 2006 hip hop poetry collection of the famous

American urban poet, Saul Williams: *The Dead Emcee Scrolls: The Lost Teachings of Hip-Hop*. Emcee is a new word derived from the acronym, MC (Master of Ceremony, or Microphone Controller). In hip hop music culture, the emcee embodies a prestigious identity. An emcee is not only a rapper but also a talented artist and storyteller who specializes in using poetic language with rhythm and music to liven up the atmosphere of a party or a concert. A skilled emcee has to go through rigorous language and music training. A skilled hip hop emcee is also sometimes called a “rhymer” as they are good at spontaneously coming up with “cool” rhyming verses to go with the rhythm of the music on the spot (called “freestyling”). In hip hop music culture, it is important for emcees to frequently engage in animated “battles” (i.e., competitions) to test their spontaneous linguistic, poetic and music talents, as good emcees are skillful in using poetic, verbal signifying (meaning-making) techniques which can be traced back to the oral cultural storytelling discourse practices of African Americans (Lee, 1993). To become a good hip hop emcee, one needs to work on expanding one’s speaking vocabulary, remembering tons of rhyming words, and needs to read newspapers and books every day to increase one’s knowledge about the world so as to be able to rap about a wide range of interesting, contemporary topics. Using the emcee title in our ELT Rap teaching materials, we wanted to introduce to Hong Kong students this prestigious new English speaker identity: *the young emcee*. We wanted to motivate students to work hard at learning the English rapping, timing and rhyming skills necessary to become good emcees, rhymer, storytellers and lyricists – all positive and trendy English speaker identities for teenagers unavailable to them before (cf. Lin, 1999).

Piloting ELT Rap as an Extra-curricular Activity in a School in Hong Kong

With the support of the school principal and vice-principal, we piloted a project entitled “ELT Rap resident artist project” in one Band 3 school from September 2006 to June 2007.

We started the project with the following set of research objectives: 1) to provide a context in which students would improve their English language proficiency; 2) to enhance students’ interest in and attitude towards learning English; and 3) to improve students’ self-image and self-confidence through positive interactions with hip hop artists and an English tutor.

Programme Implementation

To introduce the project to the students and to recruit participants, an “Artists’ Demonstration Session” was organized in September. Though there were more students interested in hip hop dance, a joint decision between the school and the research team was made to keep the original class arrangements for promoting ELT Rap. Over the course of the project, 68 high school students volunteered to join the programme. The students were divided into groups according to grade and met on different days to focus on either ELT Rap or Hip Hop Dance. On Thursdays, Group A (comprised of 28 S4-S7 students) met after school to participate in the ELT Rap workshops. On Fridays, Group B (23 students from S3-S6 participated in the ELT rap workshops, 8 of whom also participated in the dance workshops on Thursdays). Group C (25 S3-S6 students) met on Thursdays to learn hip hop dance styles.

The workshop team consisted of a team of local hip hop artists as instructors (MC Yan, MC Chef, MC ADV, MC Double T). A research team member, Ms. Margaret Ting,

served as the English language tutor working closely with the local artists. Together they led a series of afterschool ELT Rap workshops during which they taught seven rap songs (see Table 1). Another local break dance artist, Big Mouth, served as the instructor of dance workshops for students.

Table 1. English language learning during ELT Rap

<i>RAP Focus</i>	<i>ELT Focus</i>	<i>Description of Group Interaction</i>
Workshop 1: Rapped “How are you?” and Group Names	<u>Lecture</u> : Introduced letter-sound relationships, and the “Final E” Phonics Rule as in “How are you?”	Used “How are you?” to greet each other
Workshop 2: Rapped “Bee-lee-blah-lah Boom Boom”; watched “Freestyle” DVD; introduced hip hop components (rapping, breaking, DJ-ing, Graffiti)	<u>Lecture</u> : Introduced “26 Letter Sounds” as in “BLBLBB”. Worksheet with letter shape design was used.	Awarded letter shape design winners for motivation; distributed Halloween sweets to create a relaxing atmosphere.
Workshop 3: Students rehearsed previous raps and created their own lyrics	<u>Group Work</u> : Reviewed the 26 letter sounds with groups of 3-4 students. Students read out some	Arranged group practices of letter sounds

	nonsense words to practice blending.	
Workshop 4: Rapped “B-A-Bay”	<u>Lecture</u> : Introduced the “Two Vowels Go Walking” Phonics Rule as in “B-A Bay”.	Encouraged students to use their body as metronome to feel the beats
Workshop 5: Students rehearsed previous raps and designed ELT Rap logo	<u>Worksheet</u> : Finished long vowel worksheet while tutor conducted focus group interviews	Conducted focus group interviews
Workshop 6: Rapped “Rapper’s Delight” and “Chinese Poems Can We Rap?”	Lyrics of “Rapper’s Delight” and “Chinese Poems Can We Rap?”	Moved to the hall and joined the dance group to feel more about rhythm
Workshop 7: Watched “Def Society” and “Make You Look” DVDs; rapped “I Have Promises To Keep”	Lyrics of “I Have Promises To Keep”	Brainstormed with students about the performance; provided snack to create a relaxing atmosphere
Workshop 8: Reviewed all raps and confirmed programme rundown	Reviewed programme	Awarded ELT Rap button design winner for motivation
Workshops 9-11: Rehearsals for finale	Reviewed programme	Distributed ELT Rap buttons and performance

		props to student performers
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As the project progressed, the students worked with the workshop team to develop a finale performance programme. The finale show was hosted in February in the school hall and was attended by over 800 students, teachers and parents. A final count of 38 students performed in the February finale show. Based on the focus group interviews, the 56% participation rate could be attributed to conflicts in scheduling with other school activities and different expectations of the programmes. The performers enjoyed and took pride in their work, while the audience gave positive and encouraging feedback.

Research Methodology

We used a battery of research instruments for collecting data that would allow us to both assess students' linguistic competence in English and to understand the identities they were developing in response to the ELT Rap project. Pre-and post-workshop questionnaires were completed by the students in October 2006 and February 2007 respectively. We conducted mid- and post-workshop focus group interviews with high, medium and low involvement students in November 2006 at the fifth rap and sixth dance workshops, and subsequently in March 2007 at the reunion gathering. Based on the data collected in the mid-workshop interviews, some programme implementation strategies were adjusted. For example, we integrated groups of students who were focusing on raps with those focusing on hip hop dance styles in order to create a more authentic experience. We also modified the original curriculum by adding Sugarhill Gang's "Rapper's Delight" to the workshop,

with less language focus and more focus on music appreciation in order to engage students in the project more fully.

Language Learning Benefits of ELT Rap

For the many limited-English-proficiency participants at the school, rapping seemed to be easier to approach as a “speaking” rather than “listening” activity as it requires “speaking” or “spitting the words” at a fast speed; hence, words are often not very clear and comprehension can be difficult. Students with higher English proficiency would take less time to rehearse and could rap at a much faster pace, whereas students with lower English proficiency would have a much slower pace in rapping; and some felt discouraged seeing others rapping so fast when they rap together.

In spite of these difficulties, the rap songs created a fun, meaningful context to the use of English and seemed to be appealing to the students. The artists’ demonstrations had a strong modeling effect, both in learning ELT raps and in the learning attitude itself. It became clear throughout the project that the students bonded well with the artists and showed respect for their talents. It was also clear that the English tutor was only able to build credibility if she expressed knowledge about hip hop and rap. Without a “cool” hip hop image, students would only seek language support from the ELT tutor but not also identify with her as a role model in language learning.

_____The participating students expressed positive views towards this way of learning English. Some said they have learned useful phonics skills which they can transfer to their regular English learning (e.g., they can now sound out new English words). Most said they

have increased their self-confidence through performing their songs in the finale show. After the project ended, some students continued their friendships with the artists, regularly joining in the artists' local hip hop gigs in community centres. A few of them continue to write Chinese and bilingual raps on their own. Some students have also asked the English tutor to teach them more rhyming words so that they can have more words to write their rap lyrics.

4. Constructing Positive Identities through Lyrics

In this section, excerpts from the workshop participants' lyrics will be illustrated to see how emergent positive identities are being constructed. These are corroborated with excerpts from interview data to illustrate how the experience through the hip hop programme has helped some participants construct identities as better English learners.

Excerpts (1) through (3) are taken from lyrics produced by the students during their third workshop, which was the first time they had the opportunity to create their own raps. The lyrics demonstrate how the students are experimenting with rhyme, syllable structure and beats per line. In addition, these three examples show some positive expressions of identity. In (1), the students voice their enthusiasm for hip hop and their extracurricular activities connected to this 'school' practice; (2) reveals how the students link writing hip hop lyrics to an act that requires them to "use your brain"; and (3) arguably presents an attitude of confidence with English through their chosen alias "C-A-N" and their ability to "scare" others with their raps (and with their English).

(1) Workshop 3: Ka-hei & Friends

We all like hip hop
Always go to the CD-shop
When I go back home
The door is tightly locked.

(2) Workshop 3: Tom, Key & Kin

Pick up your pen and
Use your brain!

(3) Workshop 3: Carrie, Apple & Nadia

My team name is C-A-N
Carrie, Apple and Nadia Tang
Double T is our friend
We are making a horrible plan
Hey! Are you scared?

In the finale show, a group of workshop participants had written a “Thank you Artists” song to express thanks to the artist instructors of the workshops. The song was written in mainly in Cantonese and performed in the finale show by the students. Below are excerpts from the song lyrics which illustrate their newfound confidence about their campus and school life. English translations of the lines are provided in the right column:

(4)

電腦設備又係度

There are computer facilities here

不斷更新

Always upgrading

...

...

呢個地方唔可以缺少嘅一份子

They (referring to students) are all
indispensable here

努力認同求學習就個個都

All are working hard studying diligently

...

...

...唔再俾人砌低

No longer beaten by others

唔再做一頭縮頭烏龜

No longer chicken out like a shy tortoise

...

Thank you Artists!

The expression of confidence and self-worth in these lyrics is very significant, given the habitus of these working class students. Traditionally in Hong Kong, students from low banding schools, which are frequently in low-income housing areas, are stigmatized in society and labeled as ‘losers’ in general. In this song, the students are expressing a message of self-assertion—both asserting the good facilities of the school (the ever-upgrading computer equipment) and the new self-image of students: everyone is hardworking and hence becoming indispensable; they are no longer feeling like losers beaten by others nor chickening out like a shy tortoise who has to hide its head in its shell. They are using metaphors to express a new powerful identity that they are constructing both for their own school and the students in this school. It is significant that they are not referring to themselves directly but addressing this message to everyone in the school, as

they are performing this song to all students and teachers in the finale show in the school hall. Coming from the students' own creative self-expression, this message is significant. It might be said that the hip hop music and the rap genre and the self-reliant, self-assertive attitude as embodied by hip hop culture and the artists themselves seem to have inspired these students to feel a renewed confidence about their own school and the students in this school.

This newly found confidence is echoed by some other participants in the interview data. The interviews were done right after the finale show by a research team member. The interviews were done in Cantonese and below are English translations of excerpts of the interview data (S6: Secondary Six; i.e., Grade 12; S4: Secondary 4; i.e., Grade 10, etc.). Excerpts (5)-(8) illustrate how the students recognized their own learning and that they felt their English had improved over the course of the project, and (9) shows how the students gained confidence by performing in front of their peers.

(5)

Interviewer: What do you think of ELT Rap?

S6 student: It was fun!

Interviewer: Fun...

S6 student: I've learnt English...

Interviewer: Learnt English...

S6 student: And got to know hip hop culture.

(6)

S4 Student: At first I'd no idea about hip hop and rap. But after attending these sessions, I learnt that hip hop and rap are so broad! As we usually rap in English, so I also have learnt more English.

(7)

S4 Student: I think I'm much better now (勁左). When we first tried to rap "How are you?" I couldn't even rap one sentence! But now I can even rap the more difficult ones.

(8) (A Group of S5 students becoming good friends)

Girl 1: We've learnt so much!

Girl 2: The most important thing is Margaret teaching us English.

Girl 3: We've learnt more about phonics.

Girl 4: It was fun! Really fun!

Girl 2: Yeah! It was fun! And we also got to make new friends! I didn't know them before. And now we've known each other and could even hug each other!

Girl 3: And even to share the same piece of cake! (girls laughing)

(9)

(Group of students who performed hip hop dance in the finale show; the group of students are from different grade levels, from S4-S6):

Dancer 1: At first I wanted to stop dancing because I didn't want to perform on stage. But actually it's not that frightening on stage. It was fun!

Dancer 2: It's us who are benefiting... it's like learning a new skill and you feel good if you can perform.

Dancer 3: I think if you involve yourself in dancing, you'll enjoy it. And have fun with these good tutors.

Dancer 4: At first when I started practicing it was a mess. But it's ok at the end. Even today's performance wasn't a perfect one, but it's not like [as bad as] the rehearsal.

The artists were also interviewed (together with some of their workshop students who hung around them) right after the finale show. Below are English translations of excerpts from the interview data. Many of the excerpts show that the workshop team observed changes in the students' willingness to express themselves across time, an important factor in both rapping and speaking English. In (10), MC Chef points out how the students seem to have developed a new sense of self through the project as they cultivated a hip hop persona. This new, more confident self seems to show up in classrooms as well, as one student indicates in (11):

(10)

MC Chef: I've noticed the students... because of hip hop, they would actually pick up a pen and start writing their own raps. And they've changed so much! Maybe this thing [rap]... Because hip hop has changed my whole life, so I want more people can get to know it. In the first lesson, they knew nothing, and now, after they the tenth lesson, they had a show, and create raps at

home; I noticed that they've put hard work into it. They are not playing but serious about it. They can express their feelings and opinions through raps. It's good... it's a means to let others get to know them. Sometimes teachers don't understand their students' feelings. But through this chance now... the teachers can notice that the students have turned into someone else on the stage, becoming more confident... Although the time given was limited, the students showed great dedication and effort. Their performance... you can see the result! I really think they are superb!

(11)

S5 rap mentee: After learning raps from MC Chef, my Chinese composition improves. And now during the English lessons, when there are words that are a bit challenging, because of the phonic skills learnt in the programme, I know how to decode the words. And get more praises from teachers! My English teacher... I used to be unable to decode the words and pronounce them correctly, but because of the method (referring to phonics) I learnt, I know how to pronounce the words and my teacher praises me for this improvement.

The students frequently reported that they worked very hard once they committed to the project (12)-(14), a behavior often not attributed to working class schoolchildren from low-banding schools. This hard work was also noted by the workshop team artists who were impressed with the students' capacity to learn new things in a relatively short period of time (15)-(18). Their comments characterize the students as 'quick learners', 'hard workers,' and 'highly capable' English speakers and rappers.

(12)

S4 student: Extremely hard work! When they (referring to the artist instructors) comment, “Your rap isn’t good enough, go home and practice many times”, and I went home and practiced a hundred times! I almost died because of it!
(laughing as she spoke this)

(13)

S4 student: At first my friends wanted to join it, so I joined it. But after really joining it, I’m the only one who has stayed on, not wanting to quit. I have become the one who doesn’t want to quit most.

(14)

S6 student: When the programme first started, we were with the lower form students. I didn’t know them and I feel strange and bored about it. But after the show, because all of us have put in many efforts and worked together, the bonding became strong, and it was fun!

(15)

Big Mouth: At first the students were not attentive and they only came to play. But when time progressed... Some of them got more serious and could keep on [practicing]. I could notice the result of practice between the workshops. Not just breaking for a while during the workshops, but practicing outside

of the workshops. I could notice their improvement in the following session.

(16)

KDG: I've watched them rehearse, and I noticed their hard work. What a big difference between the first rehearsal and the show! They've shown high collaboration. I just hope more schools can accept this kind of teaching programme, letting more people understand hip hop.

(17)

MC Yan: It involved many students this time... The more people the harder to control. But as they worked together as a team, working very hard... It shows that students in Hong Kong have great learning capacity, apart from memorizing textbooks or rote learning! Actually, their skills can improve in a short period of time... they can absorb and learn much faster and better than we can imagine. They have benefitted a lot from it in the end.

(18)

MC Double T: It's very important not to be afraid of speaking English. After the workshops, I noticed they are more willing to speak up. They realize that isn't difficult. They might be shy. Their pronunciation might be incorrect. But now through raps and music, they can rap with ease or speak English with ease.

The school's teachers and administrators were also interviewed after the finale show, and their comments revealed similar observations regarding the students' growing confidence and their willingness to express themselves in English. Below are English translations of excerpts from the interview data:

(19) School Vice-Principal

Mr. Poon: I'm so proud of my students. They gave their best performance. Although the abilities of our students are not that high, they might not be very good in language or other aspects, but you can notice their confidence on stage and I'll give me 100 marks for their performance. What makes me the happiest is their self-confidence!

(20) School Teacher

Mr Hon: It's like working very hard all the times and getting paid off now. The students performed very well, and I expect a good show but I didn't expect that excellent! Very coherent, and very confident! I'm so happy about the show.

(21) School Teacher

Miss Jie: During the whole event, the students were so engaged, much more engaged than their usual behavior. To them, English poems are quite difficult, but they tried very hard to master the lyrics and rap with rhythm. It's so

encouraging for the students. And it gave them a sense of achievement.
They can show themselves to others.

(22) School Principal

Mr. Yan: I believe teenagers need channels to express themselves, and we need to give them room for building self-confidence. So raps, hip hop, performing on stage, are really good opportunities. We really hope that our teaching professions can support this kind of teaching approach, letting more students benefit from it.

5. Coda: Transforming Youth Identities through the Hip Hop Experience

Upon the completion of this pilot project, 10 students of the school were invited to perform their ELT Rap songs at the English Festival 2007 kick-off ceremony. They performed rapping three English songs and one Chinese song. This was a glorious moment for the school and the students and has boosted the overall morale of the school. The school had originally been selected by the Hong Kong Education Bureau for consideration of closing down due to decreasing new student enrollments. However, this event enhanced the school's public image and has partially contributed to the cancellation of the government's plan of closing down the school.

Overall, the direction of using hip hop music to engage students in using English to express their own voice, and to enhance their phonological awareness and rhyming and creative verbal skills is promising. Further curriculum research is needed to refine the curriculum for different learning styles and interest levels of students and different school

contexts. Based on the data, however, we have come to realize both the potential and challenges of capitalizing on students' desire for and investment in pop cultural artistic identities in transforming their habitus, in particular, their attitude towards and relationship with English. The central difficulty experienced in this pilot project seems to be that the local hip hop artists participating in this project themselves have limited English capital. Our research team has sought to compensate for this with the provision of an English tutor who has worked closely and collaboratively with the artists. However, when it comes to identification with their role models, students tend to identify much more readily with the "cool" local artists than the English tutor.

This difficulty notwithstanding, three of the Form 7 (Grade 13) female workshop participants were highly motivated to learn rapping and started to write their own lyrics for the artists to comment on. They have stayed in contact with the artists even long after the end of the programme and have joined in the artists' music gigs in community centres. Two Form 4 (Grade 10) boys, notwithstanding their limited English proficiency, were eager to rap for fun in their daily conversations with their friends (although mainly Cantonese is used), and expressed an interest in joining an ELT Rap Society at school if such a society is formed. Some students also tried to freestyle on their own (i.e., to come up with rap lyrics on the spot, without pre-drafting them), for instance, by rapping and adapting paragraphs from their geography textbook.

It thus seems that some of the students are acquiring a new identity of a creative language user through developing a hip hop rapper identity—in Cantonese, English or bilingual rapping. The transformation and development of such new self-identities and self-understandings seem to be a result of their informal interactions with the artists and the

modeling of such new trans-local hip hop identities by the artists. We argue that when these working class students are doing hip hop they are also acquiring new, empowered, youth rapper selves that hip hop culture seems to be offering to them. When learning and honing their creative verbal skills in writing and performing Chinese, bilingual and English raps, they also seem to be transforming their social class habitus and are acquiring new cultural capital (e.g., rhyming and rapping skills, knowledge of letter-sound relationships, new attitudes and dispositions towards English).

However, the actual translation of these ideas into a feasible, workable youth empowerment curriculum in the schools still needs further research, exploration, trial and error. These challenges notwithstanding, the observations and lessons that we have learnt from this pilot project have led us to believe that if given the right role models and scaffolding (e.g., hip hop artists with bilingual cultural capital who can share with students both rapping and creative bilingual verbal skills), students coming from working class backgrounds can be helped to break through the learned helplessness acquired through years of negative experience with language learning in the local schooling system that tends to favour students already endowed with the kind of family habitus for school success (Lin, 1999, 2005). Through transforming their own identities and acquiring empowered identities such as those of creative rapper-artists, working class students can engage enthusiastically in language learning, including learning English which is, otherwise, not a daily language for them. We, therefore, need to continue to research and explore the possibilities that trans-local hip hop cultures can offer to young students, especially those coming from social classes without the habitus and cultural capital required by mainstream schools for literacy success, so that they can exercise their agency

to change their habitus and acquire new cultural capital and new identities for empowerment.

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