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# CITIZEN JOURNALISM: Engaging pupils through hip-hop

Liz Essley THE WASHINGTON TIMES

"How many of y'all know this song?" The saxophone player smoothly yielded the notes of "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star."

The nearly 200 children in the audience started to sing along. But then the saxophone player added a few extra tones, jazzy tricks and backflips of sound.

"What is that?" the player asked.

A child's voice shouted out: "Improvisation!"

Saxophonist William E. Smith -- or W.E.S. as he is known in hip-hop -- heads the jazz band the W.E.S. Group, which gave a free concert Friday for grade schoolers. The band led the students through music basics, as well as swing, jazz and the blues, showing how each related to a style more familiar to them -- hip-hop.

"Trouble, trouble, I have it all my days," Mr. Smith sang in low, bluesy notes.

He then explained how hip-hop connects with his mournful song: "Hip-hop talks about some of the same things. Hip-hop talks about stress."

Then came an upbeat rap with the chorus: "Do 'ya know how it feels to be stressed out, stressed out?"

Kelly Hernandez, 9, a third-grader at Powell Elementary School in Northwest, said it was her first time to hear blues and swing music. It was definitely as cool as jazz and hip-hop, she

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said.

Students from four area schools attended the event, including Barnard, Kenilworth and Two Rivers Public Charter School.

"Kids are moved by music, so the arts are really important," said Kelly's teacher, Maren Richards.

Mr. Smith would agree. He started the International Association for Hip Hop Education, a nonprofit that takes hip-hop to classrooms, hoping to engage students in their studies through rhythm and sound. Besides hosting an annual conference and giving concerts, the organization goes to after-school programs, integrating lesson plans into hip-hop-style chants.

"Women in history, our song ... Women in history, are strong" starts the chorus of a fill-in-the-blank history lesson.

A former American University assistant professor of music, Mr. Smith now teaches in North Carolina but divides his time among his teaching job, his nonprofit work and his jazz band, often coming to the Washington area for concerts like Friday's, part of the Duke Ellington Jazz Festival. He said helping kids learn with hip-hop works.

"In this day and age, it's the best way [to engage kids], because it engages all their faculties," he said. "Through hip-hop you speak their language. ... Being able to speak in their rhythm and in that cadence, it reaches them more effectively."

The W.E.S. Group plays hip-hop with a positive message, unlike the music Mr. Smith said he sees in the mainstream media.

He sang out to the students on Friday: "I'm gonna show you the power inside me. You can't hold me. You can't stop me. 'Cause I was born to succeed." The children sang back, in call-and-response.

Mr. Smith teaches the same song to his after-school students, who at the end perform a concert of what they've learned. Mr. Smith said seeing hundreds of kids stand up and sing those words is what warms his heart most.

"That's like 'Wow,' " he said. "That's really powerful."