

# The Washington Post

## Spinning Hip-Hop as A Class Act for Kids

By Rachel Beckman  
Washington Post Staff Writer  
Thursday, December 25, 2008



It's not the most hard-core jam session, but it might be the cutest. On a Tuesday afternoon at Payne Elementary School in Southeast Washington, hip-hop literacy class starts in the auditorium after school. About 30 students stand in a circle while a tall, dreadlocked instructor, Khalif "MC K-Juice" Bobatoon, leads them in a chant:

*Give me the spotlight/Give me the hot seat/I'm gonna show you the power inside me/You can't hold me/You can't stop me/Cuz I was born to succeed/Cuz I was born to succeed.*

Bobatoon tells these pupils, ages 8 to 10, that call-and-response chants are "an old African way of communicating." The class uses the four pillars of hip-hop culture (MCing, DJing, graffiti and break dancing, or b-boying) to teach the children verbal skills, self-esteem and music history.

Payne's hip-hop literacy class is an after-school program that started in October. The instructors coordinate with Payne teachers to incorporate the curriculum into the class, Bobatoon says. For example, if the students need to memorize state capitals, Bobatoon might set them to a funky drum rhythm as a mnemonic device.

"It's their language," says William E. Smith, 36, who runs the program. "It's what they're surrounded by, it's how they communicate. Hip-hop, if you really get into the history and the depth of it, hip-hop comes out of a cultural matrix."

About six musicians are paid to facilitate the classes, which were also held last year at Friendship Public Charter School, at the Blow Pierce and Woodridge locations.

After the Payne students finished their positive-affirmation chants, they worked on creating graffiti burners, which are brighter and more elaborate than simple spray-painted signatures, or tags.

"We teach the history of the graffiti," Bobatoon says. "We don't tell them to go and tag a school. We're not promoting that at all.

We provide utensils and an opportunity in the classroom to utilize that visual art. So there's really nothing controversial about it."

Doreen Scott, the mother of third-grader Damon-e Melvin, says she loves everything about hip-hop and doesn't mind her daughter's learning about graffiti after school.

"She talks about [hip-hop class] every day, so she likes something about it," Scott says.

Hip-hop literacy class exists at Payne thanks to Neighbors United, a group of Capitol Hill residents who are trying to save the Eastern Branch building, which closed in August 2007. The Eastern Branch used to be run by the Boys and Girls Club of Greater Washington. As Neighbors United fights to keep the building as a community resource, it also helps coordinate after-school programs to keep kids occupied in the meantime.

Smith, who has a doctorate in ethnomusicology from the University of Maryland, became involved with the organization when he happened to meet one of the group's board members, Ellen Opper-Weiner, on a flight from the Caribbean. She and Neighbors United had been organizing soccer and basketball for the kids but were looking for more programs. Smith explained his organization, the International Association for Hip Hop Education (IAHHE), which unites people who are trying to use hip-hop as a tool in the classroom. It was a natural fit.

"We're getting involved in the community because the need is incredible," says Jerry May, executive director of Neighbors United.

The arts were integral to Smith's education. He attended New York's Fiorello H. LaGuardia High School of Music & Art and Performing Arts (which helped inspire the 1980 film "Fame"), studying classical music and jazz and playing the oboe. Some of the hip-hop he listened to growing up in the Bronx led him to an encyclopedia: A 1988 Biz Markie lyric -- "Reagan is the prez but I voted for Shirley Chisholm" -- inspired him to research the African American congresswoman. It's this kind of cross-referencing that makes him think hip-hop can do more than entertain.

Among those who use hip-hop to communicate with students, Russell Simmons has the most reach with his Hip-Hop Summit Action Network, an advocacy group that aims to develop young leaders. At the other end are individual savvy teachers who incorporate pop culture into their lesson plans without the blessing of a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. Somewhere in the middle, size-wise, is Smith and the IAHHE.

After a snack of grape juice and cheese-flavored crackers, the students work on graffiti tags of their MC names, which they chose at the beginning of the school year. Marcus "MC Lil' Marcus" Parks, 10, says it was an organic process: "Don't you know how people call you by your nickname?"

The rap world is full of hard-core monikers such as Ghostface Killah, Ol' Dirty Bastard and C-Murder, but the MC names at Payne took a less menacing tone: Kidd Ace, MC Marie Cupcake, Lil' D Rockstar, MC Lil' P.

When Bobatoon asks one girl what her MC name is, she tucks her chin to her chest and mumbles it inaudibly.

"What?" Smith says. "You tell everyone who you are, loud and proud!"

A little louder, she says: "MC Flower."