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**Can Hip-Hop Save an Illiterate Generation?  
The Substance of Truth  
By Tolu Olorunda  
BlackCommentator.com Columnist**

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*"Knowledge is Power. May that force be with you."*

**-Giovanni, Nikki. [Racism 101](#), New York: Quill, 1994, pp. 93**

*"... How many souls Hip-Hop has affected/  
How many dead folks this art resurrected/  
How many nations this culture connected/"*

**-Common, [The Sixth Sense](#), Like Water for Chocolate (2000)**

*"... Explode, my thoughts were drunken from quarts of beers/  
Was years back, before Nasir would explore a career in rap/  
As a music dude, I mastered this Rubik's Cube/"*

**-Nas, [2nd Childhood](#), Stillmatic (2001)**

*"... The glimmers of hope provoke those without dollars to dream/  
Through your existence become wealthy, knowledge is king/  
... My people be projects or jail, never Harvard or Yale/"-*

**-Nas, [Book of Rhymes](#), God's Son (2002)**

If the many statistics on functional illiteracy in the Black Community are of any merit, it's safe to conclude that we have some difficult days ahead, in our attempts to turn this calamity around. Black and Brown kids are at the lowest rung of the ladder, in every education report tallied by any group, organization or political party still interested in their affairs - for whatever reason. Searching for higher ground, educators, mainly Black and Brown, have nearly expunged all alternatives available, and still find it

difficult, largely, to account for any specific, demonstrable progress. The abysmal drop-out rate in the Black Community is a scary sight to behold, and a Black President's assertions that, "*[d]ropping out of high school is... quitting on your country,*" might not be the kind of support educators were looking for. The [selection of Arne Duncan](#), whose qualifications don't exceed a Bachelor's degree in Sociology, as Sec. of Education also seems to have hung out to dry the many hopes shared by community-centered educators. The [hoop-dreamer's record](#) as Chicago's Public School CEO screams invectives at the calls for an overhaul of the present paradigm of education, and the need for an installation of a system that values the humanity of every student - especially the Black and Brown ones.

Ralph Waldo Emerson stated eloquently, in his essay on "Intellect," the imperative to nurture and nurse the imaginations of young students, in their adventures, as they discover a world of possibilities surrounding them: "*Every man, in the degree in which he has wit and culture, finds his curiosity inflamed concerning the modes of living and thinking of other men, and especially of those classes whose minds have not been subdued by the drill of school education.*" Modern-day public school educators and administrators have certainly drilled subversion and subordination into the psyches of Black and Brown kids - teaching them that the most important quality in a student is the ability/will to sit quietly in the same seat for hours, without any interruption or interjection. This destructive model has transformed the classroom to a laboratory - into a place where kids are experimented on with standardized tests, and have become educational Lab Rats for the State. Black kids are now trained to search in external and abstract sources for intellectual compensation. They are fed the poison that their culture, history and heritage are insufficient in cultivating their mental faculty. Such pedagogy has handicapped the creativity of Black kids because, as Emerson explains, "*This instinctive action never ceases in a healthy mind, but becomes richer and more frequent in its informations through all states of culture.*"

The injection of charter and private school alternatives into the discourse on Black/Brown education has not remedied the problem. Many are of the belief that charter schools can be applied as magic wands to the failing public school system. Staunch advocates of this philosophy often exaggerate the positive results those models have produced, but are not as exuberant in admitting the damage(s) private and charter school systems have wrought in the Black Community - historically. They are unlikely to concede to studies [documenting considerably worse performances](#) in Black charter school students, vis-à-vis Black public school students. They are less likely to admit that Charter and private school programs can be capitalized upon by special interests, who hope to shorten the rope-line that guarantees equitable education to every breathing child. This theory was validated last week, in the [eloquent convictions](#) of a Republican Senator: "*If you send a kid to [public] school in D.C., chances are that they will end up in a gang rather than graduating.*" Sen. Jim DeMint's worries that public schools are automatic breeding grounds for tomorrow's gang leaders, is an ample sign of the disconnect between most lawmakers and the state of the Public/Private school systems.

What can be agreed upon, without any dispute, is the reality that Black kids are falling through the cracks, faster than a failed parachute. Black and Brown kids are wallowing in dilapidation and, as the slain Hip-Hop artist, Tupac contended, "*don't nobody else care.*" Their future has become increasingly bleak, and, without successful intervention,

bleak might soon *fade to black*. Many white public school administrators / educators, who find themselves isolated in a room filled with dark faces, often transfer unto those precious souls the fear with which they wrestle. Unable to bridge the cultural gap, they easily succumb to the stereotypes to which the mass media has associated Black kids. Playing the role of police and thief, they treat the Black/Brown males as the usual suspects in their personalized *Cops* episode. Unfamiliar with the distinct learning style patterns of Black kids, as [Dr. Janice Hale](#) has argued for decades, defeat looms large in their attempts to connect with the students.

Well, I've got good news: Help is on the way - and that help is coming through a vehicle most Public school educators have turned their backs on, for the last three decades. It always amazes me, to see Middle School and High School educators express great oblivion to Hip-Hop music/culture. It is not required that they like it, or even understand it, but it is indefensible to claim to treasure the uniqueness of young Black and Brown kids, and yet, remain indifferent and ignorant of a culture which has shaped, molded, defined, inspired, and identified them - the students. Much to the chagrin of many parents and educators, Hip-Hop music/culture has left its indelible mark on today's youth, and it's rather uncouth for them to discard this truth. The C. Delores Tuckers of the world have tried and failed. They have succeeded only in making themselves laughingstocks in the Hip-Hop community. Misogyny, Materialism and Machismo, are cancers in the body of Hip-Hop, but critics of the culture must also take into account the level of complicity society has managed, even as it castigates commercial Hip-Hop's expressions of those values.

Those who treasure Hip-Hop's prophetic impulse, and seek to correct its maladies, have also taken note of its educational possibilities. As one who was compelled to study ancient philosophy, science, and astronomy, based on a Rapper's (Canibus) obsession with those subjects, this writer is a proud member of such *clique*.

Another member, of this collective is a Hip-Hop artist by the name of [Asheru](#) (Gabriel Benn). A Peabody Award-winning writer, Asheru is also an educator and intellectual. In 2005, he co-founded a Hip-Hop literacy initiative called, "Hip Hop Educational Literacy Program" (H.E.L.P.). H.E.L.P. is conducted through the provision of "*a series of supplemental reading workbooks designed to HELP students of all reading levels through the innovative usage of Hip Hop lyrics for critical analysis, multicultural relevance, and effective literacy instruction.*" Its main objective is the promotion of "*literacy, critical analysis, and differentiated instruction while meeting the needs of all types of learners.*" As the President of H.E.L.P., and an educator for 11 years, Asheru knows, firsthand, the state of emergency in which Black kids are currently entrenched. His program, which received a [nod of approval](#) from President Barack Obama, last September, and an [endorsement](#) from Princeton University's Cornel West, has quickly become accepted curriculum in many schools, and after-school programs, across the country. Obama, in his letter of congratulation to Asheru, assured him that, "*[b]y encouraging students to push themselves to read and develop a love of learning, you are building the next generation of leaders.*" Asheru sees this as a signal for the need of a new paradigm in the education system, as it concerns Black/Brown students.

Asheru draws the inspiration for H.E.L.P. from his frustration with the illiteracy levels of students with whom he has worked, over the years. He remembers seeing High School students in the detention centers, reading on "*second and third grade reading levels.*"

Asheru's vision was to create a program of *"high-interest"* to the kids, even while providing something *"appropriate for their reading level."* Using Hip-Hop artists as the conduit to transmit this vision was conducive with the utilization of their *"celebrity and influence as a springboard for discussion around the various themes and issues... of literacy,"* he says. These themes and issues include, as Asheru sees it, *"metaphors, allegories, the parts of speech, punctuation, etc."* Through the expertise of teachers, educators and speech therapists, the H.E.L.P. program was formed.

The implementation of H.E.L.P. in the classroom is more technical than is conveniently assumed. Hip-Hop lyrics are used as vocabulary lessons, and in turn, the vocabulary word lists become the content used throughout the book. The books are broken into 4 reading levels: K-12; Elementary; Middle School; High School. The different reading levels each contain 15 activities. The brilliance of this system lies in the fact that within a specific class, all students can learn from the lessons, because of the various reading level degrees the books address. This is key because, according to Asheru, teachers are forced to deal with the *"inclusion mode, which puts Special Ed students [and] General Ed students in the same classroom,"* but they're not giving *"the tools and training to differentiate appropriately, and meet everyone's need at the same time."*

Why Hip-Hop? Of all the available alternatives, why Hip-Hop? The answer is simple, as Asheru sees it: *"I'm a Hip-Hop artist, myself... My whole world view was shaped by Hip-Hop, as a kid growing up... Hip-Hop just had a wide variety of content, and subject-matters that could be addressed, [and] I felt like it would be the perfect spring board."* He continues: *"Secondly, it's the language that our kids speak. When I was a kid, all my teachers were [from] a different generation... Now, we're in an age where both the teacher and student bought the T.I. album, both bought a Nintendo Wii, both have an X-box. So, it's the thing that bridges our gap - culturally and generationally."*

The need to dispel some of the misconceptions about Hip-Hop is also critical, because, as Asheru puts it, many educators have been fed the lie that, *"Hip-Hop and education are mutually exclusive - when they aren't."* The H.E.L.P. program is not concerned about the question of legitimacy, because its mission is, just like every other similar program, built on the premise of *"equitable education, where everyone gets a fair shake and opportunity."* Asheru views it as, *"imperative to be ahead of the curve, to be trend-setters, to find new ways to disseminate and assess information."* If this change in tune doesn't take place, educators will continue feeding into the current trend, which is, as Asheru sees it, the continuing of *"50% High-School drop-out rates, [and a] 20% literacy rate in [Washington] D.C."* The old, traditional ways have to concede to new and compatible paradigms, he contends. *"We can't use the old standards of teaching, where we have the same textbooks that say [Christopher] Columbus discovered America,"* says Asheru. *"We have to change with the time."* Technology and popular culture, in the form of audio and video, can be used positively to *"boost"* the *"instructional technique"* of modern-day educators, he adds.

Another issue of concern is the increasing emotional disconnect between educators and students, according to Asheru. Teachers must *"listen to what they have to say,"* Asheru says. The H.E.L.P. program is a great initiative to combat this problem, because it satisfies the appetite of both parties. It engages the teacher's curiosity, as well as the students'. H.E.L.P. gets students *"active"* in classroom activities, by expanding their world view through interactive curriculum, he says.

Asheru became involved in the fight against illiteracy because he sees it as the "key" to "all" the problems confronting young Black and Brown students. Asked why literacy is imperative, he answers with a level of intellectual sophistication rarely witnessed in educators: *"I believe that illiteracy is a public health issue,"* he declares. *"It leads to High School Drop-out rates; it leads to kids being unqualified to go to the job market; it leads to low wages, which leads to selling something illegal to supplement their low wages; [it leads to] youth incarceration, drop-out, drug-abuse, unplanned pregnancy, and low-test scores."* Asheru takes it to an astronomical dimension, with his insistence that illiteracy leads inevitably to a crisis in *"conflict resolution,"* among youth. He provides some sobering clarification: *"A lot of kids just could not articulate what they wanted to say, if it's a matter of life and death. That's how people get shot and killed over stupidity."* The will to *"just communicate and reason"* is broken, because of a *"deficiency in vocabulary and ability to express themselves,"* he states.

Asheru's future plans are to further the discourse on 21st century paradigms of education, and empower teachers who might be unfamiliar with the learning styles of Black and Brown youth, in their *"transition"* to the Public School. He is well aware that their *"Master's program [doesn't] prepare them for what they're coming into the classroom to see."* He is currently writing a book on the topic, temporarily titled, *"The Urban Educator's Manual: What Your Master's Degree Program Didn't Teach You."* Teachers must be prepared for the mission of *"emancipating"* Black and Brown youth, Asheru contends. The objective should be to *"teach them to teach themselves,"* he adds.

Asheru's parting message to the youth generation is as plain as it gets - and yet so powerful: *"Knowledge is power;"* to be illiterate is to be *"half-living."* By incorporating the H.E.L.P. model into classrooms, he believes the long-awaited change in the literacy rate and education interests of Black and Brown youth will come. With a solid strategic plan put forth, in the form of H.E.L.P., Asheru hopes educators across the country, and the world, will get involved, and begin *"attacking"* those forces that have held back this generation of geniuses, and scholars, for so long.

**For more information on the H.E.L.P. program, PLEASE visit:**

<http://www.edlyrics.com/>

<http://bloombars.com/>

<http://guerillaarts.ning.com/>

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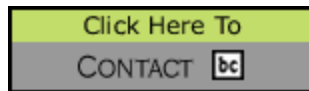
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**BlackCommentator.com** *Columnist, Tolu Olorunda, is an activist/writer and a Nigerian immigrant. Click [here](#) to reach Mr. Olorunda.*

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