Handbook of Public Pedagogy
Education and Learning Beyond Schooling
Jennifer A. Sandlin, Brian D. Schultz, Jake Burdick

Graffiti as a Public Educator of Urban Teenagers

Publication details
Richard S. Christen
Published online on: 09 Dec 2009

How to cite :- Richard S. Christen. 09 Dec 2009, Graffiti as a Public Educator of Urban Teenagers from: Handbook of Public Pedagogy, Education and Learning Beyond Schooling Routledge
Accessed on: 17 Oct 2023

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR DOCUMENT

Full terms and conditions of use: https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/legal-notices/terms

This Document PDF may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproductions, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The publisher shall not be liable for an loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.
Graffiti writing is as ancient as human communication (Reisner, 1971), but in the United States it gained widespread attention only with its proliferation in urban neighborhoods in the late 1960s and 1970s. Most Americans associate this graffiti explosion with urban gangs, regarding its markings and murals as visible, invasive challenges to middle-class and elite property, sense of security, and aesthetics. Although gangs have produced a portion of urban graffiti during the last four decades, most is more accurately linked to hip hop, a mix of cultural practices that appeared in the neighborhoods of New York and other U.S. cities during the mid-1970s (Ferrell, 1993). Anthropologist Susan Phillips (1999) argues that hip hop graffiti is actually an alternative to gangs, with “writers” organizing themselves in crews that spar with each other “through style and production as opposed to violence” (p. 313). Over the years, graffiti crews have focused urban adolescents on putting their art up around the city, inventing new styles, and organizing nocturnal visits to the subway yards, experiences that, although often illicit, are far less destructive than most gang activities (Stewart, 1989). The writer expression “graffiti saved my life” is no exaggeration; without it, many more urban kids would have become entangled in violence and crime (M. Gonzalez, Jr., personal communication, March 17, 2002; Wimsatt, 2000).

Graffiti crews are also educational organizations that promote valuable learning among their members. Judging from graffiti writers’ comments over a range of time periods and places, crews both parallel and diverge from more traditional educational institutions like schools, functioning paradoxically as both status quo and transgressive organizations. Graffiti provides poor adolescents from disadvantaged neighborhoods with knowledge, skills, and values important for success in the mainstream. At the same time, it bonds young people to their urban neighborhoods, empowering them to challenge the dominant society and to transform rather than escape their communities.

The Beginnings of Hip-Hop Graffiti

Hip-hop graffiti began in New York City during the late 1960s when a small number of teenagers from Washington Heights, the South Bronx, and other impoverished neighborhoods began blanketing the city with their “tags”—stylized signatures of names they had invented for themselves (Austin, 2001; Castleman, 1982; Hager, 1984; Miller, 1990 Stewart, 1989). Primarily concerned with “getting up” their names often and in places where they could be seen by many,
writers like Taki 183 and Julio 204 used the city’s walls, bridges, monuments, subways, and other public places as their billboards. These pioneers quickly gained the admiration of their peers, and soon scores of mostly Black and Puerto Rican adolescents from the Bronx, Brooklyn, and Manhattan began saturating public places with their tags in defiance of the mainstream press and public officials who, despite some early indications of neutrality, regularly excoriated graffiti (George, 1994; Lachmann, 1988; Mailer, 1974).

Soon simply getting up one’s name was no longer sufficient for recognition. Writers began to seek out more risky and conspicuous tagging spots to set themselves apart. They painted on overpasses, tunnels, outdoor handball courts, and, most importantly, the exteriors of subway trains, which with their combination of danger and visibility, rapidly became the most prized canvasses. Aided by new spray paint technologies and the introduction of ultra wide markers, innovators such as Phase 2 and Super Kool also began to enlarge and embellish their tags, and over time originality in design and color—what the writers called style—became the thing, according to an early writer, that “defines who you are [and] separates the men from the toys [unskilled beginners]” (Schmidlapp & Phase 2, 1996, p. 72). By the mid-1970s, the most skilled graffiti writers were painting elaborate works with multi-colored, “bubble” letter tags accompanied by cartoon characters, landscapes, and other imagery. The “piece” and the artistic skill necessary to create it had become the primary currency of status and respect (McDonald, 2001).

Today, elaborate graffiti pieces in the tradition of Phase 2 and other pioneers (see Figure 26.1) are referred to as hip hop graffiti, distinguishing them from the scrawling of gangs and to acknowledge their place among the rich mix of artistic forms that emerged out of New York’s poorest, most oppressed neighborhoods during the 1970s.

For most Americans, hip hop graffiti has been largely invisible since that time, due in large part to massive eradication efforts that have virtually eliminated graffiti on subways and greatly reduced it in other mainstream settings. Denied these sites, writers began creating their pieces around abandoned buildings, on freight trains, and in isolated warehouse and industrial areas where their peers continue to see them but where the middle and elite classes seldom travel. Despite this decline in overall visibility, graffiti’s attraction to urban youth has remained relatively consistent over the years, especially among the poor Black and Latino adolescents, predominately male, who have always constituted the medium’s core U.S. constituency (Castleman, 1982; Miller, 1990). This appeal lies both in graffiti’s rebellion (Jese, 1999) and in the benign antidote it provides to adolescent isolation, boredom, powerlessness, and anonymity—the same experiences that draw many urban kids to gangs (Flint 707, n.d.; GinOne, 1999; Schmidlapp & Phase 2, 1996). For those with the least voice within society, it is a powerful vehicle for representing one’s existence (Abel & Buckley, 1977), a

Figure 26.1 A graffiti piece at an abandoned building in Portland, Oregon. Photo courtesy of Richard Christen, 2009.
way, according to Tasar 32 (n.d.), to proclaim that “yes, I am here. I do interact with society and I do matter” (¶ 2).

Graffiti Groups

Those who write graffiti for more than a few months typically go through a series of structured stages similar to those of more recognized careers (Lachmann, 1988; McDonald, 2001). The writer begins with tagging, a solo activity that satisfies a range of individualistic needs. After a few months, most taggers abandon the marker and spray can for non-graffiti pastimes, but those who continue on to the next career stage—the painting of larger, more complex pieces—begin to collaborate and to forge close personal and professional relationships (Abel & Buckley, 1977; McDonald, 2001; Schmidlapp & Phase 2, 1996). The new emphasis on style prompts them to cluster in groups, constructing, according to Richard Lachmann (1988), “a total art world” for discussing new designs, devising aesthetic standards, and judging innovations (p. 242). Historically, writers from the same schools and neighborhoods began gathering at local coffee shops and parks in the early 1970s, and eventually “writers corners” appeared—subway stops where writers from across the city would gather to share ideas and to watch and evaluate train pieces.

Many of the early artists also dabbled in neighborhood gangs, which, like graffiti, satisfied their craving for identity and recognition. Anxious to paint across the city, most found the gangs too restrictive, however, and eventually broke these ties, often advertising their independence by wearing gang-style denim jackets on which they painted their graffiti tags. Preoccupied with their own rivalries and impressed by the writers’ fearlessness and skill, gangs generally left them alone, but for a short time in the early 1970s, artists in areas where gang wars were especially intense sought safety in numbers by establishing writing gangs such as Brooklyn’s ex-Vandals. This strategy backfired, however, sparking conflicts among writers and with some of the larger non-graffiti gangs, and by 1973, the ex-Vandals and similar groups had disbanded (Castleman, 1982).

As the graffiti gangs dissolved, writers began to organize more informal groups, or crews, not for protection, but for companionship, collaboration, and support (Rose, 1994). The first crews were exclusive master groups of highly skilled and experienced writers—“crack team[s] that couldn’t be touched…a chosen few that were in a class by themselves,” according to Phase 2 (Schmidlapp & Phase 2, 1996, p. 28–29). Beginners’ crews and groups composed of writers at various levels of proficiency followed (Ferrell, 1993; Phillips, 1999). The Baltimore writer Deka (1999) became involved in one of these multi-level crews as a teen. Touched by “a fever” (¶ 3) for graffiti at the age of 10, he regularly cut his high school classes to watch and draw with older, more accomplished writers who would critique his work and at times share letter models with him. Eventually some took him into their crew, where Deka assisted on pieces designed and executed by his mentors: “they took me on, and I just started doing characters and stuff like that cause they were doing heavy detail work,” he recalls, “Its almost like an apprenticeship, they’d start you off with characters so you couldn’t mess up the wall too bad” (¶ 6).

Graffiti Crews as Educators

The mentor-apprentice relationship that Deka describes raises the graffiti crews from mere associations of writers to educational organizations that deliberately and systematically transmit knowledge, skills, values, and sensibilities to their members (Dewey, 1916; Cremin, 1988). Skills and dispositions directly related to painting—what Posh One (1998) describes as “the piecing side of things” (p. 1)—are the crewmembers’ most obvious acquisitions. Young writers learn specific techniques, and they also plan and execute complex, original projects, collaborate with
others, manage time, and practice to improve. In the process they build self confidence, resiliency, a work ethic, and an appreciation of craftsmanship (Deka, 1999; McDonald, 2001; Phillips, 1999). These dispositions are essential if one hopes to become a master, according to Los Angeles writer ManOne (n.d.). “I don’t care how good you are, first you must pay some dues, practice, and get up a little bit before you try to flex some raw styles,” he stresses. “It took me about 3 years before I even attempted to bust a burner…I had too much respect for the cats who were up at that time and I knew if I went over them it better burn or I’d be toyed up” (¶ 8).

Other learning within crews is more hidden but no less significant. For example, forced to build and enforce their own behavior codes, writers learn an essential premise of democratic citizenship; they have the right and responsibility to govern themselves. The effort of Shok 1 (1999) and his British crew to regulate copying is a case in point. The early graffiti writers held originality in high regard and condemned blatant copying as “biting”; at the same time, the use of the old to make the new was a valued method in graffiti and the hip hop culture in general (Potter, 1995; Schmidlapp & Phase 2, 1996). Shok 1’s (1999) crew embraced the duties of group membership by adopting a compromise conception of biting, one he describes as “taking and then denying the writer the credit for that which was taken” (p. 2). Graffiti crews also help adolescents to soften the sharp individualistic edge that they honed as taggers. Graffiti writer, author, and community organizer William “Upski” Wimsatt (1994) identifies the crew’s merging of “cowboy individualism” with “organizational unity...character and commitment” (p. 157). Similarly, Jese (1999) admits that he began tagging “to destroy shit...and to look cool,” but as a mature writer he now appreciates his work’s potential to affect others and welcomes the restrictions that a writing community imposes. “When you’re starting out,” Jese accepts, “you have to pay your dues before you can say that you are a part of a culture that has rules and boundaries” (¶ 8).

It would be naïve to claim that all learning within the crews is positive, however. Graffiti writing, although less destructive than many other alternatives available to urban youth, does encourage teens to break into train yards, place unwanted marks on private property, “rack” or steal paint, and as veteran writer Ser (2000) points out, to lie when “you go home and your mom’s like, ‘where were you?’” (¶ 58). Male writers also receive negative gender lessons (McDonald, 2001), learning to define their masculinity through the graffiti culture’s demands for bravery, fortitude, and competitive mettle, and by dismissing the typical girl as ill suited for the life. Those girls who do write are seldom taken seriously; most males presume that they are drawn to graffiti only by a boyfriend or a desire for sex. “The minute you decide you want to be a girl writer, you might as well take your reputation and throw it in the dirt,” according to Lady Pink (2000, p. 3). Lady Pink continues, “Girls have a lot to put up against and you have to harden yourself to being called a whore and a slut, and that you’re only going into the train yards to get down on your knees for a bunch of guys” (p. 3). The toughest girls can gain some respect as writers, Pink claims, but they can never fully escape male efforts to marginalize them. “I didn’t pick the name Pink; my boys picked it for me” she remembers. “They decided that the name I had been writing...wasn’t cool cuz it was like a guy’s name and they really thought it was important that I show that I was a female when I put my name up” (p. 1).

The positive and negative knowledge, skills, and values learned in graffiti crews mirror much that schools have traditionally taught, either overtly or in their hidden curriculum (Kaestle, 1983; Martin, 2002; Postman, 1996). Ian Maxwell’s (1977) study of the hip hop community in Sydney, Australia, suggests that graffiti, although considered counter-cultural if not plainly subversive by most, teaches adolescents to function within dominant structures and expectations. Its ideology, Maxwell points out, conforms nicely to liberal, humanist ideals—individualism, free expression, brotherhood, and liberty—that have framed the dominant western ideologies since the Enlightenment. Drawing from British cultural studies scholarship, he posits that graffiti,
Graffiti as a Public Educator of Urban Teenagers

like most counter-cultural youth scenes, is “fundamentally structured by, and recuperate[s] at least some of the values and structures of the parent culture” (p. 52). Scholars also remind us that graffiti culture, despite its focus on individual expression, assigns writers to hierarchical roles similar to those in schools and the workplace (Lachmann, 1988; Noah, 1997; Rahn, 2002). Indeed, many writers find success in school and in mainstream occupations, largely, according to William Wimsatt (1994), because graffiti taught them a broad range of skills and values, serving as a bridge “into the world of people with promising futures” (pp. 42–43).

**Graffiti as Transformational**

The observations of Maxwell and others are correct to a degree. Graffiti crews teach competitiveness, the ability to work both independently and in collaboration, a sense of responsibility, and citizenship skills—all types of learning that blend with the dominant culture and potentially open doors to conventional success. But graffiti is also inherently transgressive, a public defiance of traditional property concepts and hierarchies (Phillips, 1999). “If I’m competing against anything, it’s more against the system,” Deka (1999) trumpets, “cuz the system is a fraud and its fucking everybody” (¶ 20). Prophetic the Alphabetic insists that writers “have grown to loathe and have contempt for [authority], for all the conceivably right reasons” (Schmidlapp & Phase 2, p. 13). These writers may hope for success in the dominant society, but they also clearly see graffiti as a way to resist the status quo, a tool for challenging the power of those responsible for its oppression. Most graffiti messages are not overtly political, but the act of writing can be (Shomari, 1995). According to Daim (1997), adolescents worldwide use graffiti “to fight against laws and prejudice [and] to lead a self-determined and creative life [and] show society that they’re unhappy with what it has to offer” (¶ 4).

Perhaps graffiti’s most significant educational contribution is that, unlike most schools, it introduces writers to the critical understanding of dominant power structures necessary to engage in this fight for justice. Graffiti provides adolescents with both a means to rebel and the ability to join the mainstream. But it also shows crewmembers another option: they learn that their knowledge and skills empower them to transform their communities and that their resistance can generate positive alternatives. Henry Giroux (2001) points out that not all oppositional behaviors effectively challenge an oppressive status quo. Some offer little insight into the nature of domination and, like the school behaviors of the lads in Paul Willis’ *Learning to Labour* (1977), might actually reinforce existing hierarchies. True resistance, Giroux argues, has a “revealing function” that fosters a critique of power and opportunities for self-reflection and struggle for emancipation (p. 109). The actions and statements of most beginning graffiti writers bear little resemblance to Giroux’s resistance; they crave voice, respect, and justice, but lack an understanding of the roots of these needs or the actions needed to address them. Over time, however, writers engage in a reform process that teaches and to some extent gives them the elements of power needed to transform their individual and collective lives.

Control over communication is the first component of this transformative praxis. As a communication form, graffiti works on two levels. First, it allows writers to talk to each other, “an underground means of communication for those who are excluded from the public sphere” (Back, Keith, & Solomos, 1999, p. 71). Through graffiti, the writers proclaim themselves and their talents to those they have not actually met, assembling a broad community without physical interaction. Drax marvels that “even without the physical contact of networking with people, interaction is constantly being made between writers that don’t even know each other” (McDonald, 2001, p. 203). Graffiti is also the writers’ primary tool for communication with the dominant society. For Coco 144, writing is
a cry, a scream from [New York’s] streets. In doing this, we got to say something that was a statement. This was a way of saying, ‘Hey, I’m Coco. This is where I’m from, and this is what I’m doing.’ (Schmidlapp & Phase 2, 1996, p. 14)

Like “shouting all over a wall” (McDonald, 2001, p. 203), graffiti forces the wider world to finally pay attention to Coco and other writers, making as Ivor Miller puts it, “Ralph Ellison’s ‘Invisible Man’ visible” (Miller, 1990, p. 74).

Paradoxically, the ambiguity of graffiti to non-writers magnifies the power of its message. Just as Herb Kohl (1972) felt “like a voyeur, peering into the lives of strangers” (p. 9) when he viewed graffiti, outsiders generally find this communication puzzling. Writers revel in the confusion because it reverses the normal power relationships, giving them knowledge that eludes those typically in control. Many writers gain special satisfaction when the viewer’s reaction is apprehension, fear, or bewilderment (McDonald, 2001). When “people say, ‘Oh it’s threatening sitting on a train full of graffiti’…we like it,” Stylo admits. “We don’t want everyone to feel comfortable with graffiti, we’d rather they didn’t” (McDonald, 2001, p. 158). For Zaki, “it’s quite a wonderful feeling to be misunderstood by the rest of society…I’m glad they don’t know, it’s something they will never understand and if they did understand, would you really want them to in the first place” (McDonald, 2001, p. 158). The implications of these remarks are clear: many writers understand that the control of a communication form is a powerful and essential reform tool, one that stitches individuals together and equips them with recognition and power in their interactions within the wider society (Miller, 1990).

Graffiti writers also build and learn the value of inclusive communities. As described earlier, Shok 1’s crew defined the borrowing of another writer’s styles in a way that promoted expansive membership, one including both innovators and imitators. Crews, in contrast to the constrictions of gangs, also commonly reach beyond neighborhood, race, class, and generational boundaries. For Coco 144, the crews “broke a lot of barriers. I’m talking about racial barriers—people from different neighborhoods, different boroughs. It wasn’t a color thing” (Schmidlapp & Phase 2, p. 24). Deal (n.d.) recalls how his mentor Dondi “took inspiration from prior generations … [and] openly passed on knowledge and style to new writers” (¶ 6). This linking of generations fueled the advancement of writing, according to Deal, for “if writers have an understanding of where they came from, they will know where they need to go” (¶ 10). Graffiti writers “are family” for Atome (1997). “It goes much deeper than painting associates, you know. Mentally we’re on the same levels,” he points out. “The painting might have originally brought us together but over the years you experience a lot of what life dishes out and you’re there for each other” (p. 2).

The third transformative lesson learned and practiced in the graffiti crews is that real power lies within rather than outside of their communities. Richard Lachmann (1988) reports that graffiti muralists in the 1970s and 1980s generally painted in their own neighborhoods, due in part to the police’s lack of interest in the ghetto, but also because local building owners, businessmen, school officials, and peers appreciated and encouraged their efforts. Writers also tend to recognize the importance of reconstructing rather than abandoning or destroying neglected structures. The recombination of unwanted, ignored pieces into new forms, or as Tricia Rose (1994) writes, “stray technological parts intended for the industrial trash heap into sources of pleasure and power,” is a dominant graffiti and hip hop method. (p. 22). The DJ fashions fragments of old recordings into new dance tracks. The break dancer weaves traditional African and Brazilian moves into movements for the American streets. And the early graffiti writers “both tapped into and transcended their environment” (Ferrell, 1993, p. 6), transforming old trains, bridges, and buildings into sites of beauty and cultural pride. As Brim puts it, “You look around the neighborhood and you’ve got all this rubble and shit, and yet you come out of there with the
The attitude toward life that you can create something positive” (Chalfant & Prigoff, 1987, p. 17). The theme of making things that look ugly look better permeates the artists’ conception of graffiti: “The spirit of writing is making the world a beautiful place,” according to Lady Pink (Miller, 1990, p. xii); Zephyr dreams of making “New York’s grey and dirty subways the most exciting moving art spectacle the world’s ever seen” (Austin, 2001, p. 182); and Ace envisions transforming an empty concrete wall at his Montreal school into something more humane (Rahn, 2002). The common writer call for beautification not gentrification is a potent statement of the belief that much good exists within supposedly barren urban communities, that they should be protected from the bulldozers of urban development, and that the neighborhood can be saved without being destroyed.

Possibilities for Graffiti-Based Education

In her influential book, Other People’s Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom, Lisa Delpit (2006) contends that if students from oppressed communities are to effect individual and social change, they must learn both an understanding and appreciation of their own culture and the codes for participating in the culture of power. The absence of one will obliterate diversity; without the other, marginalized groups will remain different but impotent. Unfortunately, schools and other educational institutions regularly ignore one or both of these bodies of knowledge when educating poor and minority students. Most offer a traditional curriculum that privileges the learning necessary to function and succeed in the mainstream, but, at best, are only marginally successful at teaching it to non-dominant groups. Even many supposed multicultural programs focus on either increasing the effectiveness of learning dominant ways or the preservation of difference for its own sake rather than for empowerment (Sleeter & Grant, 1999). What is needed, according to Peter McLaren (1998), is “a view of multiculturalism and difference that moves beyond the ‘either-or’ logic of assimilation and resistance” (p. 256). Or as Delpit puts it, we must develop an education in which students from non-dominant groups learn “the codes needed to participate fully in the mainstream of American life…[and] the arbitrariness of those codes and of the power relationships that they represent” (p. 45).

Graffiti crews offer an important example of how this integration might look. As discussed earlier, graffiti provides adolescents opportunities to acquire knowledge, skills, and values that are prized and useful in the dominant culture. At the same time, writers construct individual identities rooted in their cultures and neighborhoods and participate in activities with the potential to transform their communities. Graffiti crews teach students that assimilation is not the only legitimate application of their knowledge of dominant codes; writers use their learning to empower their communities not escape them, to build links to the dominant society rather than to join it. Hoping to tap into this educational potential, many urban schools have begun to include graffiti-based activities such as mural painting at the school site (Keiser, 2000; Quilliam, 2000). But to adequately tap into graffiti’s transformative potential, these efforts need to extend into students’ neighborhoods.

Graffiti’s illegality is a significant barrier to such educational activities, of course. For many writers this criminality is essential to the medium, the element that makes graffiti so thrilling, transgressive, and appealing. “Working illegally,” according to Daim (1997),

you combine things that writing legally can’t give you…the feeling to shock and provoke [and] to get respect from your fellow writers. I feel that someone who writes only legally cannot grasp the whole spirit of graffiti. (¶ 1)
Some writers have shown that there is a middle ground, however, one that is both legal and transgressive. Since the mid-1980s, eradication programs have forced writers to paint in isolated sites such as abandoned warehouses, industrial areas, and in neighborhoods considered dangerous by most. Many writers have worked to set up legal “walls of fame” in these areas and have negotiated with storeowners, companies, and landlords for permission to decorate their buildings. In these spaces they can learn, practice, and teach their craft legally, with less harassment, and most importantly, without co-opting the transgressive nature of graffiti. Writers continue to work in crews and to pass their skills and sensibilities on to beginners. They also model community organizing, and by painting non-commercially and in much-maligned neighborhoods, they challenge capitalist norms and invest in poor, urban communities that many have forsaken.

Over the last two decades, a number of formal graffiti- and hip hop-based educational organizations rooted in legal activities have emerged, building partnerships with schools and other traditional institutions. At Chicago’s University of Hip Hop, urban teens learn from master artists and organize community projects such as “Graffiti Gardens” where they plant flowers in front of murals (Hoyle, 2002). Higher Gliffs (Counts, 2004), a non-profit youth organization based in Chicago and Oakland, California, has helped young people to create murals focusing on the cultural heritage of their neighborhoods. In the process, teens develop a community identity linked to collective roots and often engage in social action through communication, community, and reconstruction. For example, in the spring of 2000 Higher Gliffs gathered a group of young people to paint the wall of a business in West Oakland (see Figure 26.2), one of the poorest and most violent neighborhoods in the city (M. Gonzalez, Jr., personal communication, December 26, 2001).

Using funds from local out-of-pocket donations rather than outside grants, the artists designed an elaborate mural focused around the images of Malcolm X and César Chávez. Lasting over several weekends, the painting of the mural was a community event, with locals, including numerous gang members, gathering to watch, applaud, and share food. Several weeks later, Oakland city officials demanded that the mural, which obviously beautified the neighborhood, be painted over because it lacked a permit. The city’s action galvanized the local community, and in a textbook example of Giroux’s transformative resistance, it organized to save the mural.

Oakland Leaf (2007), a non-profit committed to “community transformation through creative education,” sponsors a range of activities for Oakland young people, including urban arts programs in several schools and a “peace camp” with an intensive arts and social justice curriculum. Many of these activities use hip hop music, dancing, and graffiti to connect adolescents to their communities, past and present, and as vehicles for student activism. For example, Oakland Leaf co-director Gerald “G” Reyes...
Graffiti as a Public Educator of Urban Teenagers • 241

(personal communication, April 9, 2009) taught a week-long expeditionary learning unit entitled “Resist-tags: The art of resistance in graffiti writing” to seventh-graders at Lighthouse Community Charter School.

Students learned graffiti history, philosophy, and techniques and formed crews within which they designed and executed mural panels guided by the question: “what message of conquest, struggle, or resistance do we have to say to Oakland?” (see Figure 26.3). In Youth Roots (2007), a high school critical media and leadership program sponsored by Oakland Leaf, teens learn skills in spoken word, emceeing, music production, graphic design, and digital technology “in order to act & interact as public transformative intellectuals, artists, organizers, & media communicators who have a sustainable positive impact” (¶ 2). Striving to be “critical minds at critical times,” Roots members have produced digital poems CDs, posters, t-shirts—all available on the Youth Roots myspace page (n.d.).

The programs sponsored by Higher Gliffs, Oakland Leaf, and similar organizations offer little of the risk that has been one of graffiti’s major attractions over the years. Still, these organizations offer promising models for partnerships between the graffiti culture and more traditional educators and institutions—collaborations that will provide legal settings for hip hop learning, bring the knowledge and skills learned in graffiti crews to a larger audience, and possibly avoid many of the negative lessons associated with crew membership. These organizations also preserve the transgressive nature of graffiti, engaging urban adolescents in their neighborhoods and enhancing their capacity to understand and transform these communities. Like bell hooks’ “engaged pedagogy” (1994), these programs challenge the hierarchies of power that permeate so many classrooms. They aim to create, in the words of Brooklyn rapper and educator Rha Goddess, a “community of hip hop intellectuals” who comprehend the nature of urban problems and are poised to work for reform. “There’s street knowledge and then there’s academe,” according to Rha. “The ones who marry both...are able to process what goes on and some step up and influence it” (Wimsatt, 2000, p. 118). A graffiti education, whether in a crew or any other educational organization, cultivates this marriage.

References


Graffiti as a Public Educator of Urban Teenagers • 243