

HIP HOP EDUCATIONAL LITERACY PROGRAM

*Research-based Strategies for
Promoting Literacy Development*

- ✓ Engaging All Learners
- ✓ Literacy Development
- ✓ Promoting Lifelong Learning
- ✓ Evidence-based Assessment

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EDUCATIONAL LYRICS

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Hip Hop Educational Literacy Program – H.E.L.P. Research-based Strategies for Promoting Literacy Development

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Hip Hop Educational Literacy Program – H.E.L.P. Research-based Strategies for Promoting Literacy Development

Introduction

The *National Assessment of Educational Progress* (NAEP) recently reported that while reading scores among U.S. 4th-graders have steadily risen since 2000, 8th-graders' scores remained generally stagnant. In both grades, the significant reading test score gap between low-income and Black and Latino students – both native English speakers and English Language Learners (ELLs) – and their middle class and white peers, persists. Further, recent studies find writing skills among high school and college graduates to be sorely lacking (National Endowment for the Arts, 2007) and a reported 30 million adults in the U.S. have 'below basic' literacy skills (Diverse: Issues in Higher Education, January 12, 2006).

Literacy is the basis of instruction for virtually all academic subjects. It is essential to most well-paying jobs and to participation in civic life. Conversely, the inability to read and write is correlated with conditions that negatively impact quality of life. As such, the Federal Government has made literacy a national educational priority through No Child Left Behind (NCLB), requiring continual testing and holding public schools accountable for raising students' reading scores. The vital importance of literacy and NCLB mandates have made improving literacy skills, particularly among struggling students, a pressing issue facing U.S. schools today.

H.E.L.P. addresses this need, drawing on leading research in literacy learning and instruction and connecting with the *Standards for the English Language Arts* put forth by the *National Council of Teachers of English* (NCTE) and the *International Reading Association* (IRA) (1996). As a supplemental literacy program, H.E.L.P. assists schools and teachers in building literacy skills, particularly among struggling students and students from diverse backgrounds. Each H.E.L.P. workbook is organized

into four *Studios* (A, B, C, and D) which are differentiated by ability level and contain appropriate activities for students at particular stages of reading and writing proficiency.

Research in language acquisition and literacy instruction show that programs which are effective with struggling readers and writers and diverse groups of students:

1. Engage all learners,
2. Draw on proven theories and practices of literacy development,
3. Promote lifelong learning, and
4. Provide for evidence-based assessment.

Following, this paper will examine pertinent research within each of these areas and illustrate how H.E.L.P. uses research-based and proven instructional practices to promote literacy development among diverse students at various stages of reading and writing ability.

Engaging All Learners

Engagement is essential to school achievement; in order to be good readers and writers, students must be engaged in literacy activities. This is particularly important for struggling students whose academic difficulties can predispose them to disengagement in the classroom. In addition to differentiated curriculum, discussed later, researchers have found other effective strategies for engaging students of all cultural backgrounds and ability levels in academic learning. Within this research, culturally responsive teaching, multicultural education, and incorporating multiple intelligences are paramount.

In Shirley Brice Heath's seminal study, *Ways With Words* (1983), she found a disconnect between African American children's in-school

and out-of-school literacy practices. The failure of schools to capitalize on students' literacy practices outside of school inhibited their engagement in classroom learning and contributed to academic difficulties. Since then, many researchers have examined the importance of culturally relevant teaching and multicultural education in bridging this disconnect and promoting academic success, particularly, among historically marginalized students.

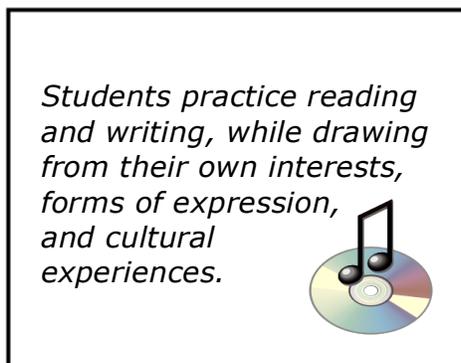
Multi-cultural education incorporates diverse perspectives into the curriculum, particularly those traditionally underrepresented in school. Both approaches call for a holistic curricular focus that capitalizes on the rich cultures and heritages of all students and incorporates their strengths, interests and cultural experiences. This re-quires changes in conventional curriculum and teaching materials (Banks & Banks, 2006).

Research shows that Hip Hop can be used as an effective tool for accomplishing this goal. Hip Hop-related content allows students to draw upon their prior knowledge and interests, thereby increasing their engagement in academic learning (Stovall, 2006). In a study of literacy development among urban adolescents, Morrell and Duncan-Andrade (2002) found that incorporating aspects of Hip Hop culture can help teachers to make connections with students, aid students in grasping unfamiliar concepts, and greatly improve their literacy skills.

H.E.L.P. draws on research showing that when students' experiences and perspectives are used as a valued part of the curriculum, they are more likely to engage in classroom learning (Nieto & Bode, 2007). While adhering to local and national literacy standards, the H.E.L.P. workbooks explore topics of interest to students from many different backgrounds. Hip Hop music and lyrics provide an entrée into a variety of activities and textual forms through which students practice reading and writing, while drawing from their own interests, forms of

expression, and cultural experiences. Further, with its attention to the perspectives of urban youth culture, H.E.L.P. aims to optimize academic engagement among students over-represented in school failure.

Also, important to culturally relevant and multicultural education is social change. For this reason, H.E.L.P. incorporates socially conscious, popular song lyrics that engage students in critical analyses of important social issues. For example, one H.E.L.P. workbook uses Kanye West's song, *Diamonds from Sierra Leone*, to challenge students to interrogate popular media images of consumerism. By examining issues related to "conflict diamonds," students connect U.S. consumerism to social unrest in other parts of the world and they think critically about their own buying power and habits. Connecting students' lives, social issues and academic learning creates engaging ways to build literacy skills and foster personal and social awareness. Further, all H.E.L.P. workbooks, like this workbook, are cross-curricular and support literacy development in multiple disciplines (e.g. social studies, science, and mathematics).



Gardner's (2006) groundbreaking *Theory of Multiple Intelligences* also plays a vital role in engaging all learners. He points out that schools tend to value only two intelligences—linguistic and logical—and disregard other ways in which students are intellectually able. Thus, they miss important opportunities to draw on students' strengths and marginalize those who do not meet officially sanctioned standards. Focusing on students who have struggled with traditional curriculum, H.E.L.P. incorporates multiple intelligences to build conventional literacy skills.

For example, activities draw upon musical intelligence, using rhythm, rhyming, and melody to help students with spelling and building vocabulary. Creating conceptual maps, students use spatial intelligence to make connections

between ideas. Using interpersonal skills, students work collaboratively to develop deeper understandings of texts. Drawing pictures, writing raps, songs, and poems, students draw on their creativity to build a variety of reading and writing competencies. In addition to skill-building, such activities capitalize on students' varied interests and learning styles to connect them to academic learning.

Incorporating instructional strategies that promote culturally relevant teaching, multicultural education and multiple intelligences, H.E.L.P. optimizes students' opportunities for engagement and supports the literacy competencies needed for school success.

Literacy Development

As Taylor Stewart (2004) points out, NCLB "focuses reading instruction on the following five components: phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency and comprehension" (p. 732). These components are also reflected in the NCTE language arts standards and the recommendations of the National Reading Panel (NRP 2000). All cite phonemic awareness and phonics as foundational to effective literacy programs.

H.E.L.P. Studios A and B (for students at lower levels of proficiency) pay particular attention to phonemic awareness and phonics, using multiple instructional strategies that connect with different learning styles. Researchers have found visual and auditory aids extremely useful in fostering phonemic awareness and decoding skills, particularly for older struggling readers and ELLs (Le Fevre, Moore, & Wilkinson, 2003; Peregoy & Boyle, 2000). Using music and lyrics as an entrée into literacy learning, H.E.L.P. uses sound-matching, sorting and repetition, reading aloud and reading while listening, with the use of visual aids, to reinforce sound-letter connections and phonemic awareness.

Building vocabulary improves linguistic fluency, reading comprehension and writing skills. Further, as Manzo, Manzo, and Matthew (2006)

point out, "vocabulary level has the highest correlation of all other factors and with every measure of every aspect of intelligence" (p. 616). Researchers recommend that teachers use a variety of strategies to build vocabulary. In her meta-analysis of literacy instruction literature, Taylor Stewart (2004) found some commonly cited strategies including wide reading, "having students apply word knowledge in multiple contexts...[and] continual daily attention to—and talk about—words (p. 737), using multimodal approaches (e.g. combining reading with writing, oral language, images and music) and group read-aloud.

H.E.L.P. immerses students in word usage. Activities provide both direct instruction on meanings (i.e. vocabulary lists) and opportunities to use words in multiple contexts, while learning correct grammar, syntax, spelling, and sentence structure. Students identify synonyms and homonyms and examine literal and inferential meanings of words. Reading and writing journal entries, letters and poems, they identify different types of words (e.g. nouns, verbs, prepositions) and apply them to multiple textual forms. Further, H.E.L.P. uses guided writing activities to assist intermediate and advanced students in producing more formal and sophisticated texts like expository and persuasive essays.

H.E.L.P. provides consistent and varied opportunities for reading a variety of texts. Throughout the activities, students continually read, reread, write and revise multiple forms of texts to build knowledge and writing skills. Additionally, the differentiated H.E.L.P. Studios make it easy for teachers to place students in small groups for reading instruction and fluency stations, allowing students to read aloud and get feedback from peers and the instructor. These strategies help students on all levels of proficiency to build their recognition and understanding of words and to develop a strong foundation for effective writing and reading fluency and comprehension.

As described by Durkin (1993), comprehension – effectively making meaning of text – is the "essence of reading" (p. 13). Reading comprehension is a complex task involving the multiple

competencies, including actively engaging with texts, using prior knowledge, understanding text structure and organization, making inferences, synthesizing information, and employing strategies for improved understanding (Fiene & McMahon, 2007; IRA & NCTE, 1996; Taylor Stewart, 2004). These competencies, which demonstrate higher order thinking and an understanding of the nature of written language and how it is used are also essential to good writing (Grisham & Wolsey, 2005; Tompkins, 2002).

While phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, and fluency are essential, they do not necessarily lead to reading comprehension. For example, research shows that “older children receiving phonics instruction were better able to decode and spell words and to read text orally, but their comprehension of text was not significantly improved” (NRP, 2000, p. 9). Thus, teachers should use specific practices to foster comprehension.

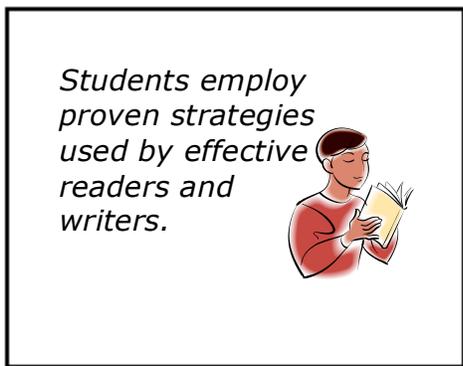
Teaching practices found to be effective in increasing reading comprehension are those in which students

- receive direct text comprehension instruction,
- intentionally analyze texts,
- generate and answer questions about the text,
- engage in individual silent reading, guided reading and cooperative learning, and
- monitor their own comprehension (Fiene & McMahon, 2007; IRA & NCET, 1996).

H.E.L.P. incorporates all of these instructional strategies. Its flexibility provides opportunities for individual silent reading and group work, using a variety of assigned and student-generated texts. It also facilitates guided reading, helping students draw on useful before-, during-, and after-reading comprehension strategies.

The lyrics used in H.E.L.P are selected because they have multiple levels of meaning and can be both accessible and thought-provoking for students of different abilities. H.E.L.P. activities allow students to understand the literal and figurative meanings of texts as well as related themes and concepts. In doing so, they practice the strategies that good readers and writers use.

Using the Studios, students can work on different difficulty levels. For example, a student at a 3rd to 5th grade reading level might draw an image and write a paragraph to depict and analyze the meaning of a poem. At the 9th to 12th grade reading level, a student might identify denotative and connotative meanings and write a persuasive essay. Research shows that older struggling readers who are learning to decode need simultaneous comprehension instruction. Thus, H.E.L.P. incorporates multiple proven strategies to improve comprehension while also addressing other essential aspects of literacy



development.

To address different aspects of literacy development, researchers suggest a balanced literacy approach that attends to the learning styles and proficiency levels of individual students (Kirsh, Olczak, & Mounts, 2005). Differentiated reading instruction is essential to this approach, particularly in classrooms of diverse learners.

As stated above, H.E.L.P includes a wide variety of literacy development activities. They include silent reading and reading aloud, expository, persuasive and creative writing, listening, group work, drawing, research, and discussion. Students can use different activities, which draw and build upon varied skills and understandings, individually or in groups. In creating learning stations, around specific activities, the teacher can ensure that each student is building competency in multiple areas of literacy development.

As Le Fevre, Moore, and Wilkinson (2003) point out, older struggling readers may disengage when presented with content that is simplistic and different from that given to their peers. These students desire content that is, as one student said, “the same as the other kids” (p. 56). As described earlier, the four H.E.L.P. Studios target different reading levels and writing proficiency. Using the same H.E.L.P. workbook, individual students with different skill levels engage in activities that are appropriate for their ability level. This can minimize the potential for embarrassment, particularly among older struggling readers. Additionally, it provides for flexible, homogeneous or heterogeneous grouping. These strategies help to create a “positive, reinforcing, cooperative environment” (Kirsh, Olczak, & Mounts, 2005, p. 273), as recommended by advocates of balanced literacy.

Finally, researchers stress literacy instruction that capitalizes on students’ interests, prior knowledge, and out-of-school literacy practices, particularly among struggling and reluctant readers and ELLs (Hinchman, Alvermann, Boyd, Brozo, & Vacca, 2004; Peregoy & Boyle, 2000). Research shows that this can be done effectively using popular media in the classroom, including Hip Hop music and culture (Hass Dyson, 2003; Weinstein, 2007). As Morrell and Duncan-Andrade (2002) point out, “Hip-hop can be used as a bridge linking the seemingly vast span between the streets and the world of academics” (p. 89).

Today, youth from all walks of life are familiar with and enjoy Hip Hop music like that used in H.E.L.P. Thus, H.E.L.P provides engaging content for many young people and an easy way for teachers, even those unfamiliar with Hip Hop or youth culture, to relate instruction to their students’ lives. H.E.L.P activities ask students to make connections to their existing knowledge, to construct new knowledge and to transfer understanding between multiple contexts. Through reading, writing and thinking, socially conscious Hip Hop lyrics are used to connect to students’ interests and experiences for academic literacy learning.

Promoting Lifelong Learning

While achievement on standardized tests is essential, building the capacity and desire for lifelong learning is vital to students’ future success. As pointed out by Boykin (2000), this requires that young people develop “more positive attitudes toward schools and the schooling process... become more task persistent, engaged, and exert more effort in their schooling endeavors” (p. 13). These dispositions towards school-based learning are directly related to motivation and self-efficacy: the confidence that one can, through their actions, achieve school success (Bandura, 1994; Muris, 2001) and the will and desire to put those actions into effect. Fostering these qualities is vital to effective literacy instruction (Alvermann, 2002; Cummins, 1994).

Academic self-efficacy and motivation are mutually supportive. Students who believe they can do well in school tend to be more motivated to engage academically. Engaged students are more likely than disengaged students to experience academic success which, in turn, reinforces a belief that they can achieve. This cycle helps to produce “students who are confident in their academic capabilities... engage in more self-regulatory strategies that promote success in school... are more efficient problem solvers, and show more persistence” (Usher & Pajares, 2006, p. 7).

Research shows that prior school failure can significantly undermine academic confidence and motivation (Jonson-Reid, Davis, Saunders, Williams, & Williams, 2005). This is particularly true for struggling students, for whom academic failure has been persistent. Thus, these students are in dire need of instructional materials that are engaging, developmentally appropriate, build on their strengths, and allow them to experience success. Further, Le Fevre, Moore, and Wilkinson (2003) found that reading reluctance can be “compounded when [struggling] students lack access to age-appropriate and interesting text” (p. 37).

The H.E.L.P. curriculum reflects the assertion that “exposure to high interest and age-appropriate materials has positive motivational and learning consequences” (Le Fevre, Moore, & Wilkinson, p. 56). It provides content and multiple instructional strategies that are relevant and engaging for students with a variety of learning needs and preferences. Further, it provides a means for many students to enter into literacy instruction with some familiarity with the academic content. This can be important for struggling students for whom wholly unfamiliar texts, coupled with poor reading and writing skills, may reinforce reluctance. H.E.L.P. strategies enhance students’ possibilities for experiencing the classroom successes that are so vital to academic motivation and self-efficacy.

Metacognition – i.e. learning to learn – also promotes academic confidence, perseverance, and lifelong learning. Students who are able to improve upon their learning processes, are more likely to take on challenging tasks, persist in learning, and experience success (Graham, 2003; Wolters, 2003).

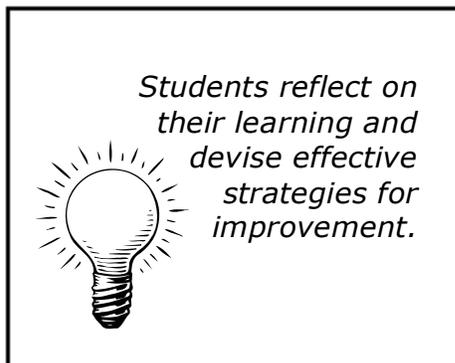
Black et al (2006) point out two important elements of metacognition;

1. “relating what you are learning to what you already know, realizing when you understand something, or not” and
2. “planning what to do next, checking the outcomes of strategies employed, and evaluating and revising strategies” (p. 123).

H.E.L.P. addresses these elements by building on prior knowledge and incorporating self-regulatory activities in which students critically reflect upon their cognitive processes, identify learning challenges and devise effective strategies for improving their reading, writing, and thinking skills.

However, literacy as a tool for lifelong learning is not merely about technical skill-building. As Freire (1983) states, “reading is not exhausted

merely by decoding written word or written language, but rather anticipated by and extending into knowledge of the world” (p. 5). As such, he asserts that students, especially those from marginalized groups, must use “critical literacy” as a tool for understanding and changing their social conditions.



Noguera (2007) asserts that critical literacy can “transform the outlook of marginalized youth from one of desperate resignation, to one of critical awareness and pragmatic optimism” (para 15). This requires literacy instruction “rooted in the taking and imagining of diverse perspectives on real and imagined material and social worlds” (Gee, 2001, p. 717) and texts through which students can critically analyze the conditions of their lives.

H.E.L.P. provides such opportunities in multiple ways. Its lyrical content highlights many issues young people face, including, poverty, violence, self-image, self-advocacy, decision-making, leadership, and social responsibility. Through a variety of activities, students analyze their own and others’ perspectives on multiple issues in order to “read” their world and better understand possibilities for personal and social transformation. Further, activities like writing letters and persuasive essays, analyzing social and political processes, conducting research and imagining a better world, build practical skills for real-world participation in civic society.

As outlined above, H.E.L.P. is designed to promote the qualities of successful students – academic confidence and motivation, persistence, the ability to effectively solve problems and to self-regulate learning. It also provides opportunities for critical reflection and analyses of important issues that impact young people’s lives, from multiple perspectives, with the goal of individual and social change. These competencies are essential in promoting lifelong learning and ensuring students’ success beyond the school walls.

Evidence-based Assessment

NCLB mandates have increased the imperative for literacy instruction and reform that is “evidence-based” and “data-driven,” bringing issues of assessment to the forefront of teaching. Assessing literacy development is a complex task that requires monitoring multiple competencies – e.g. spelling, grammar, sentence structure, organization, vocabulary, fluency, comprehension etc. (Fiene & McMahon, 2007; Hudson, Lane, & Pullen, 2005; Le Fevre, Moore, & Wilkinson, 2003).

As outlined earlier, H.E.L.P. activities build a wide variety of reading and writing skills. The teacher guide provides clear guidance on how to assess students’ performance on each of these activities. For instructors who are unfamiliar with the lyrical content, vital contextual information about the Hip Hop artist and lyrics is included.

The teacher guide also contains summaries of each developmental domain outlined in the NCTE *Standards for the English Language Arts*, e.g. reading for perspective, applying language skills and developing research skills. The summaries explicate what counts as evidence of mastery in each domain and include matrices detailing which domains are addressed in each activity. Further, there is an *Answer Keys* for all close-ended activities, like phonemic, spelling and vocabulary exercises. To assess students’ writing in the categories of *mastery*, *developing* and *emerging*, in form, content and presentation, H.E.L.P. provides a NCTE standards-based Writing Rubric.

As Johnston (2005) asserts, classroom assessment should also “socialize children into monitoring and guiding their own literacy learning” (p. 384), which is vital to persistence and lifelong learning. Opportunities for

feedback, rewriting, rereading and revising embedded in H.E.L.P. provide for more authentic assessments of students’ abilities and foster the metacognitive skills they need to be effective and independent learners.

Teachers gain definitive evidence about individual students’ reading and writing abilities.



The resources provided by H.E.L.P. assist teachers in gaining definitive evidence about individual students’ reading and writing abilities to create authentic assessments and design instruction that builds on their strengths and addresses their weaknesses.

Conclusion

Literacy skills are vital for success, well being, and full participation in our society. The failure to promote literacy development, particularly among historically underserved students – e.g. low-income students, students of color and ELLs – exacerbates existing inequities and contributes to cyclical poverty in families and communities.

In order to prepare today’s students for success, now and in the future, teachers and schools must foster a wide variety of literacy skills that enable them to effectively gather, evaluate and use information, build their own bases of knowledge and communicate with a variety of audience, for multiple purposes. Further, leading literacy expert Jim Cummins (1994) points out

...the centrality of students’ preexisting knowledge, the importance of deep rather than superficial cognitive processing, and the necessity for students to develop metacognitive awareness... [and that] cultural validation promotes engagement with instruction (p. 569-570).

Thus, effective literacy instruction must also draw on students’ prior knowledge, connect to their cultural experiences, and attend to their needs for lifelong learning. Unfortunately, as

Cummins asserts, the uniform, scripted and “one-size-fits-all” (p. 565) literacy programs typically used among underserved students are sorely deficient in meeting these objectives.

Drawing on proven strategies and national standards for literacy development (NCLB, NCTE and IRA), H.E.L.P. is designed to promote a wide variety of essential literacy skills in a flexible, supportive and engaging learning

environment. For teachers, H.E.L.P. provides a way to connect literacy to students’ interests, experiences and individual learning styles and needs, which is particularly vital for struggling and underserved students. As a supplement to a comprehensive literacy program, H.E.L.P. can effectively assist students in not only meeting accountability standards but realizing their full potential as readers, writers and lifelong learners.

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