

Jabari M. Evans, **Hip-Hop Civics: Connected Learning in the Rap Classroom**, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2025, 201 pp., \$34.95 (paperback).

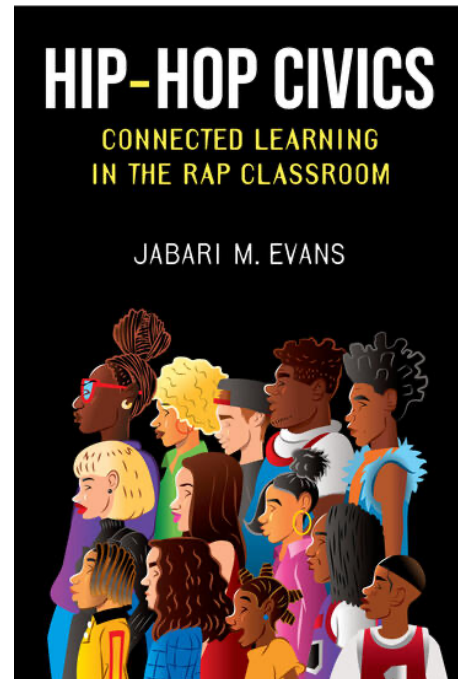
Reviewed by  
Rachel Williams  
George Mason University

In *Hip-Hop Civics: Connected Learning in the Rap Classroom*, recording artist and educator Jabari M. Evans leverages his experience in the hip-hop industry and his years as a community organizer and activist to present a compelling intervention in the education of racialized minority children in segregated urban schools. “Hip-Hop Civics,” as he sets it out, is a program for increasing the self-efficacy, academic and community engagement, and job preparedness of students through something many are already interested in: hip-hop.

First, I would like to set forth my own credentials, as Evans does in his book. I am a former elementary school teacher who worked in the school system in the late 2010s, partially overlapping with the years Evans conducted his fieldwork (2016–2019). I have taught at a school that was almost entirely Black, and I observed firsthand in my own classroom many of the struggles that Evans describes students facing. I have also used hip-hop as a pedagogical tool. My own experiences are enough to convince me of the importance of the intervention Evans wants to make.

At the same time, my experience influences my critique of this book. Its opening chapters can be a bit difficult to follow; this is a shame, because when it hits its stride, it hits it. The later chapters focus on the findings from Evans’s ethnographic research and feature many insightful quotes from students. The beginning, however, may be difficult to access for those who are either not familiar with education or are not bought into the goals that Evans sets out. Because *Hip-Hop Civics* argues for the necessity of changes in education, accessibility is important. Some of this could be remedied through a more organized approach to presenting the subject matter in the opening chapters, which can feel unintuitive.

I would also argue, in a similar vein, that throughout the book Evans does not deeply develop the civic portion of *Hip-Hop Civics*. Perhaps this is due to what I will later argue is a key tension looming over the book’s pages; in any case, potential stakeholders the book is designed to reach may not have a decent grasp on what civic education is and why it is important to the discussion at hand. Evans writes as if, perhaps because his experience seems to reflect this, that the merits of hip-hop will need more explication than the merits of civics. While understandable, this choice left something to be desired.



Evans weaves personal histories, institutional critiques, and ethnographic data to paint a picture of a school system that fails majority Black communities. Evans argues that students' poor outcomes are connected to a cultural disconnect. Students feel that the culture of school stands in opposition to their lived experiences outside it. In one sense, this is understandable; teachers and administrators in Evans's observation sites were often worried that violence of the Chicago streets that surrounded the schools would permeate their walls. On the other hand, this perspective created a split that caused students to feel out of place, not listened to, and not valued at school. Cutting students off from the culture outside of school gave them no space to process their experiences and chart out a different path.

Hip-hop, then, gave the students space to explore these feelings. Evans describes how the students were prompted to investigate the topics they wanted to rap about before recording their song and how that process made them more invested in their work and energized the entire classroom community. From there, they could learn to think critically about all sorts of issues in their lives, from problems in the neighborhood to issues at school. For students growing up under tremendous stress, the therapeutic value of having a creative space to express themselves through a medium they felt culturally connected to could not be overstated (pp. 82–97).

Evans's case for Hip-Hop Based Education (HHBE) is at once self-evident and too good to be true. He describes how participation in the Songwriting and Production Program (SWP), the program at the center of his ethnography, has helped students build careers in creative industries, become owners of small enterprises, and create economic opportunities for themselves that they wouldn't have otherwise. In a very real sense, the collaborative and self-efficacious classroom environment transformed students from disengaged into shining examples of entrepreneurial excellence. Throughout the book, Evans backs up his arguments with educational theory and research, demonstrating how HHBE is brimming with teaching practices that are beneficial for students. Yet these practices are not widespread, especially not in schools that serve low-income, disadvantaged communities. This is partially due to a lack of resources; Evans repeatedly highlights how the pressures educators face on their time and budgets make it difficult for art education to be taken seriously when state testing is right around the corner. Another part is how HHBE in action often looks chaotic and unfocused. The teaching artists in the SWP had to strategize to make sure their classrooms came off in a way that school administrators would approve of. However, beneath all of those constraints, a bigger question lurks: Is the goal of education to produce self-efficacious, entrepreneurial, civic-minded subjects, or is the goal something else?

Evans's ethnographic data collection ended before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, before the release of Nikole Hannah-Jones's (2019) *1619 Project*, before the parents' rights movement took full shape and it became clear how school board meetings have become key political battlegrounds. In 2025, the year of *Hip-Hop Civics*'s release, the Department of Education is being dismantled and universities are scrambling to pay the federal government bribe money to keep their funding, having committed the heinous crime of fostering diversity of population and thought. In light of this, I would like to return to my claim that the "civics" in *Hip-Hop Civics* is not fully explored. In the first chapter, Evans states the following:

*Hip-Hop Civics* also complicates much of the HHBE research by foregrounding civic education and community mindset as central components of Hip-Hop's educational value. While HHBE often centers on pedagogical practices and cultural identity, *Hip-Hop Civics* delves deeper into how Hip-Hop can serve as a catalyst for political agency and civic participation among Black youth. It complicates the narrative by addressing the complexities and nuances of civic engagement within marginalized communities. (pp. 15–16)

I would argue that the book shows students developing a community mindset, but it is not entirely clear how this translates into political agency or civic participation; however, that is not my main point. Again, what is the goal of education, and is it compatible with the outcomes *Hip-Hop Civics* produces? The students quoted in the book develop their political consciousness through critiquing things such as media ownership structures, the institutional neglect their communities face, and the school system itself. These critiques are at direct odds with a national trend in education toward rejecting any classroom discussion of systemic oppression and its effects. Diving fully into what it would mean if students like the ones in Evans' data could have more power in the music industry, in their communities, and in schools would make for a very different book, one that would almost necessarily have to depart from its focus on career attainment and pivot toward a structural critique of the forces that have produced the students' situation in the first place. If the goal of education was to inculcate the community mindset Evans talks about, then we would have a different school system—a different society—altogether.

I do not blame Evans for choosing not to dive all the way in. While there are certainly teachers everywhere who would find the students' contributions to be incredibly valuable, there are also teachers and policy makers who are not interested in seeing students develop any capacity for civic engagement that does not align with their goals. This is of special importance when a key obstacle to schools carrying out a *Hip-Hop Civics* program is funding and when the federal purse strings have been turned into puppet strings, at least on the university level. If his goal is to make an intervention within the current system, critiquing the system at length could prove counterproductive or put off potential audience members and prevent other students from experiencing the wonderful outcomes the SWP students did. However, the lack of a deeper critique leaves the book in an odd limbo, constantly almost saying the quiet part out loud without ever speaking above a whisper.

Despite this, *Hip-Hop Civics* is still a worthy read, especially for anyone with the authority to practice any of the interventions it suggests. Just because education has become such a fierce battleground does not mean we should cease to fight on it, and just because Evans's work does not say the quiet part out loud does not mean it says nothing. If nothing else, it provides interested parties with a roadmap for creating the kinds of educational spaces that will be needed if we want to build a different society.

**Reference**

Hannah-Jones, N. (2019, August 14). The 1619 project. *The New York Times*.  
<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/08/14/magazine/1619-america-slavery.html>