

What Germany's Educational System Can Learn from Sweden's Engagement with Hip-Hop Culture

A Response to Söderman

Michael Kröger

Johan Söderman's insights into how Swedish Study Organizations have engaged with the foundational values of Hip-Hop culture reveal that, in Sweden, Hip-Hop was swiftly embraced as a significant enrichment. In Germany, meanwhile, it has often been perceived through a superficial, stereotypical, and demeaning lens—a view that persists in certain social segments. In contrast to Germany's historical focus on issues such as linguistic degradation and the glorification of violence, Sweden recognized and harnessed opportunities offered by Hip-Hop for identity building, integration, and language development, as well as creative and artistic education.

Söderman points out that since the early 2000s, Sweden has cultivated a robust network dedicated to Hip-Hop pedagogy. By contrast, it is only recently that Germany has slowly begun to see the educational potential in Hip-Hop, moving beyond its sometimes justified criticisms. This change, however, seems more a reaction to Hip-Hop's growing mainstream popularity than a result of internal motivation. The past decade has seen a significant increase in school workshops focused on graffiti, rap, DJing, and breakdancing in Germany, yet the area still lacks comprehensive networking.

The notion of a “pedagogy of trust,” highlighted by Söderman, strikes me as a vital approach to working with young individuals. Unfortunately, however, the everyday reality for educators and students often revolves more around restrictions and rules than fostering trust. For instance, classrooms are locked instead of being offered as sanctuaries for students, smartphones are banned and seized rather than guiding students toward a constructive engagement with digital technologies, and any behavior that strays from the “norm” is labeled as disruptive or provocative.

I am deeply hopeful that with Germany's inaugural "Hip-Hop Class" (Hip-Hop as a formal school subject for three years, featuring four weekly hours and graded evaluations; see the response to Hein and Blackman in this volume), we can tackle the educational opportunities Söderman outlined and fully capitalize on the myriad possibilities that stem from offering Hip-Hop as an elective. The ethos of "each one teach one" is as essential as it is challenging, given its contradiction by the educational emphasis on uniform qualifications, grading, and the resulting competitive environment among students. It is thus even more crucial to convey and exemplify this spirit of solidarity to students. In the Hip-Hop Class, "each one teach one" became our rallying cry, animated by the students' interactions and numerous workshops conducted by the Hip-Hop Class students for peers from other schools or countries. The trust extended by the teacher was consistently reciprocated by the students, not only facilitating trips to Berlin, Frankfurt, and New York but also fostering a lasting and positive bond between the students and the educator who was leading the class. Working on projects that the students had chosen themselves not only enhanced their teamwork but also fostered the individuality, creativity, and personal growth of everyone involved, including the teacher. The teacher then evolved into more of a guide, providing the students with ample freedom to pursue their projects, while carefully avoiding any undue influence on their creative journey. In this incredibly vibrant process, the final year of the Hip-Hop Class saw the students independently producing a range of projects including a rap album, a graffiti book, a fashion line, a Hip-Hop escape room, various podcasts, and a documentary about their class. These creations were later showcased and celebrated at a public event at the end of the term.

Pairing the school setting with Hip-Hop culture turns out to be exceptionally effective for bringing to life the educational themes Söderman highlighted. As a subject in the curriculum, Hip-Hop ignites an extraordinary level of engagement, leading to heightened motivation and even a newfound excitement for school. This enthusiasm has been shown to boost student achievement across the board, strengthen bonds among peers, and significantly enhance everyone's sense of agency.