

Rap Music-Making as Relational Agency: An Assemblage Approach to Inclusive Participation and Voice in Education

Abstract

This study examines how students and teachers engage in rap music-making to foster inclusive participation and relational agency in music education. Drawing on a qualitative, practice-based case study in a Japanese elementary classroom, the study explores how students co-create meaning through voice, rhythm, and interaction within a dynamic classroom assemblage.

The study aims to contribute to ongoing discussions on equity and inclusion in education by examining how contemporary popular music practices—particularly rap—can reconfigure classroom participation. It further seeks to advance theoretical understandings of agency by conceptualizing it not as an individual attribute, but as relational, emergent, and enacted through interaction. In many educational contexts, teachers organize opportunities for musical expression in ways that privilege students with prior training or confidence in conventional forms of performance. As a result, some students' voices are amplified while others remain marginal within classroom participation structures. In response to these inequities, the study addresses the following research questions:

- 1) How do students participate in and experience rap music-making as a form of musical expression?
- 2) In what ways do teachers and students expand access to participation and voice through rap-based pedagogy?
- 3) How do students enact agency through interaction and co-creation in collaborative musical practices?

By focusing on students' lived experiences, the study responds to global calls for culturally responsive pedagogies that recognize diverse forms of expression and knowledge-making.

The study adopts a qualitative, practice-based case study design situated in a Japanese elementary school classroom. It examines a series of rap music-making lessons in which students compose and perform rap using voice, rhythm, and lyrical expression. Classroom activities include structured cypher-based practices, in which students form circles and take turns contributing improvised or prepared lyrics, as well as collaborative group composition tasks. Multiple forms of data were collected to capture the complexity of classroom interaction, including video recordings, observational field notes, and participant observation conducted during the lessons. In addition, action research was carried out in collaboration with the music teacher and the homeroom teacher, allowing ongoing reflection and refinement of pedagogical practices. Reflective accounts and semi-structured interviews with both teachers provided further insight into instructional intentions, perceptions of student learning, and evolving classroom dynamics. The analysis focuses on students' lyrical productions, interactional patterns, and multimodal expressions—including voice, gesture, and bodily engagement—as integral components of meaning-making. Particular attention is given to students who are less visible within conventional participation structures and to how they access alternative pathways to engagement through rap practices. Methodological triangulation across multiple data sources enhances the credibility of the findings.

The study draws on Gert Biesta's notion of subjectification and Mustafa Emirbayer and Ann Mische's temporal-relational framework to conceptualize agency as relational, emergent, and temporally situated. In addition, the classroom is understood as an assemblage of human and non-human elements—including voices, bodies, rhythms, language, spatial configurations, and cultural practices—within which agency is dynamically enacted.

The findings indicate that students expand their repertoires of musical expression through participation in rap music-making. By mobilizing the voice as a primary instrument, students experiment with rhythm, flow, and lyrical creation in ways that are accessible and personally meaningful. These practices reduce traditional barriers to participation and enable a broader range of students to engage in musical expression. Through cypher-based activities, students participate in reciprocal interaction and shared authorship. They respond to one another's ideas, build on contributions, and co-construct musical works, thereby enacting collective and relational forms of agency. In this process, agency emerges not as an individual capacity but as something constituted through interaction and unfolding across time. The findings further show that students create a classroom environment characterized by enjoyment, mutual recognition, and a sense of belonging. Students experience being heard and valued, which supports their engagement and participation. In addition, students connect their musical work with social studies content, particularly history, thereby deepening their understanding across subject areas and supporting integrative learning. From a theoretical perspective, the findings illustrate how students enact agency within an assemblage of social, cultural, and material elements. The interplay of voice, body, rhythm, peer relationships, and cultural practices creates conditions under which new forms of participation and expression become possible.

Overall, the study demonstrates that students and teachers co-create learning environments that support inclusive participation and relational agency through rap music-making. By foregrounding students' experiences and interactions, the study contributes to global discussions aligned with the theme of WERA 2026 Focal Meeting and advances theoretical and pedagogical understandings of inclusive participation, relational agency, and assemblage in contemporary education.

References

- Biesta, G. (2009). Good education in an age of measurement: On the need to reconnect with the question of purpose in education. *Educational Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability (formerly: Journal of Personnel Evaluation in Education)*, 21(1), 33-46.
- Emirbayer, M., & Mische, A. (1998). What is agency?. *American journal of sociology*, 103(4), 962-1023.
- Katz, M. (2023). *Music for inclusion and healing in schools and beyond: Hip Hop, techno, grime, and more*. Oxford University Press.
- Deleuze, G., & Guattari, F. (1988). *A thousand plateaus: Capitalism and schizophrenia*. Bloomsbury publishing.
- Kawahara, S. (2023). *Ongaku gengo geijutsu ni kansuru gengogakuteki tankyū Linguistic analyses of music and verbal art*, Keiō gijuku daigaku