

Literacy through hip hop



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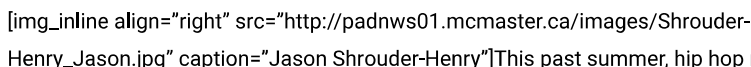


BY EILEEN LIU

SHARE



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 This past summer, hip hop music flowed from Regent Park in Toronto while children aged eight to 12 learned how to read and write. The students were part of the Literacy Through Hip Hop initiative created by third-year McMaster health science student Jason Shrouder-Henry and his friend Shahmeer Ansari from the University of Toronto.

In May 2005, Shrouder-Henry and Ansari approached TD Canada Trust with a proposal to improve literacy skills in children living in poor Toronto neighbourhoods. Using hip hop music as a source of inspiration, children learned to read and write about the issues, history and artists of the hip hop culture.

"A lot of kids in poor areas of Toronto like hip hop," says Shrouder-Henry. "If we can take a medium they like and use it to change their literacy skills, it can only be positive."

The program stresses the importance of positive hip hop. Unlike the music often associated with *MTV*, positive hip hop contains no derogatory comments and does not perpetuate the lavish lifestyle of mainstream artists. Instead, it addresses problems in society: issues with the government, the role of the black population and poverty. Artists such as Mos Def and Talib Kweli are critical of contemporary culture; they do not reproduce it, says Shouder-Henry.

"We are targeting a younger population," he says. "At that age, they are more impressionable and it's easier to enact change in them."

Literacy is an essential skill many children do not have, he says, adding children in poorer neighbourhoods are often cast as trouble makers by society. The Literacy Through Hip Hop program ignores such social labels while striving to bring out the best in the children involved. In the month that the program ran, Shrouder-Henry saw marked improvements in most of the children he worked with. "Many of the kids are smart. They just need someone to support and encourage them."

Shrouder-Henry is no stranger to working with children. He has organized a university preparation project with high school students in Hamilton and plans to establish a program that teaches high school students the basics of banking and finance.

"I think university students need to get more involved," he says. "Many university students don't realize that being here is a big deal. They could be such positive role models for younger kids."

The innovative Literacy Through Hip Hop program has caught worldwide attention. Shrouder-Henry and Ansari are currently working with Frontier College to expand and formalize the program. This month it will be run in five schools in Toronto and one school in Halifax. By September 2006, the program should be in schools in Vancouver, Montreal and the Prairies with plans to expand into the United States and worldwide.

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