

GO IN STAY FRESH

Why We Need Hip-Hop in Schools

James "Fresh Professor" Miles



Mad Love for GOTTA STAY FRESH

“James Miles seamlessly combines his personal experiences, pedagogical perspective, and deep knowledge of hip-hop into a vibrant take on the modern classroom. I promise you’ll be fully immersed in not only the trajectory of Miles’s life and how it shaped his approach to education, but also how your own trajectory can shift to make a more meaningful impact in the classroom. *Gotta Stay Fresh* is a necessary and timely staple for your teaching library—a remarkable force for change!”

—**Emily Smith Buster**, blended & personalized learning program manager and proud Texas educator

“Yes! It is past time for the classic American art form of hip-hop to come to more classrooms, and James Miles can show you how in this fun and empathetic book.”

—**Anya Kamenetz**, author of *The Stolen Year* and *DIY U*.

“With his trademark wit and passion, the Fresh Professor uses stories, case studies, and neuroscience to reveal a hip-hop framework teachers can use to transform classrooms into student-centered spaces. Accessible and compelling, *Gotta Stay Fresh* is an essential (and superfly!) manual that belongs in every educator’s library.”

—**Mike Kleba**, New York state high school English teacher and theater director, author of *Otherful*

“*Gotta Stay Fresh* beautifully demonstrates how hip-hop opens the aperture of learning for all students, radically shifting our education system. At the same time, Miles provides joyful, hands-on tools educators need to pursue these approaches in their everyday work. It’s an invaluable book for animating powerful new imaginaries for our future.”

—**Heather Ashley Hayes**, advanced assistant professor, University of Alabama

“Step into the dynamic realms of hip-hop education with *Gotta Stay Fresh*, the groundbreaking new book by James Miles, affectionately known as the Fresh Professor. As a longtime student, colleague, and fellow educator, I have witnessed firsthand over the past decade the transformative power of the Fresh Professor’s innovative teaching approaches. Through the seamless combination of classroom anecdotes, storytelling, process drama, relevant easy-to-grasp ideas, and more, the Fresh Professor skillfully engages and inspires educators from all backgrounds to embrace hip-hop concepts in their classrooms. Even for educators who aren’t familiar with hip-hop music and culture, *Gotta Stay Fresh* equips them with the tools and confidence they need to create inclusive environments where students feel a strong sense of belonging and know their voices matter. *Gotta Stay Fresh* is not just a book—it’s a paradigm shift that will leave an indelible mark on the world of education, fostering a generation of empowered and inspired educators.”

—**John Robinson**, educator, artist, coauthor of *Youth Culture Power* and *How Can I Move the Crowd?: A Classroom Activity Handbook*

“James Miles is the personification of who hip-hop is as a professor—a fresh professor, I must add. The future of hip-hop education needs direction, and his book provides the literary GPS for where it’s going. *Gotta Stay Fresh* exemplifies the mindset of growing up in hip-hop, exhibiting integrity in looking good, sounding good, and having your own style and perspective that’s respected.”

—**Vinson “Wordsworth” Johnson**, artist, Florida middle school teacher, author of *Socks* and *What Words Are Worth Vol 1*.

“Fresh Professor’s book reinforces the need for bringing the CULTURE of hip-hop into the classroom. With ease, he brings the reader into the world of hip-hop culture and then makes an impenetrable case for why the future of education MUST include a hip-hop aesthetic.”

—**Dr. Jason “J. Rawls” Rawls**, artist, assistant professor at the Ohio State University, coauthor of *Youth Culture Power* and *How Can I Move the Crowd?: A Classroom Activity Handbook*



GO DON'T STAY FRESH

Why We Need Hip-Hop in Schools

James "Fresh Professor" Miles

free spirit
PUBLISHING®



Copyright © 2024 by James Miles

All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. Unless otherwise noted, no part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without express written permission of the publisher, except for brief quotations or critical reviews. For more information, go to freespirit.com/permissions.

Free Spirit, Free Spirit Publishing, and associated logos are trademarks and/or registered trademarks of Teacher Created Materials. A complete listing of our logos and trademarks is available at freespirit.com.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Miles, James (Educator), author.

Title: Gotta stay fresh : why we need hip-hop in schools / James “Fresh Professor” Miles.

Other titles: Got to stay fresh

Description: Huntington Beach, California : Free Spirit Publishing, an imprint of Teacher Created Materials, Inc., [2023] | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2023012430 (print) | LCCN 2023012431 (ebook) | ISBN 9781631988769 (paperback) | ISBN 9781631988776 (ebook) | ISBN 9781631988783 (epub)

Subjects: LCSH: Educational change—United States. | Language arts—Correlation with content subjects. | Hip-hop. | Art—Study and teaching. | Affective education. | Culturally relevant pedagogy. | BISAC: EDUCATION / Teaching / Methods & Strategies | EDUCATION / Urban

Classification: LCC LA217.2 .M55 2023 (print) | LCC LA217.2 (ebook) | DDC 370.973—dc23/eng/20230801

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2023012430>

LC ebook record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2023012431>

Free Spirit Publishing does not have control over or assume responsibility for author or third-party websites and their content. At the time of this book’s publication, all facts and figures cited within are the most current available. All telephone numbers, addresses, and website URLs are accurate and active; all publications, organizations, websites, and other resources exist as described in this book; and all have been verified as of May 2023. If you find an error or believe that a resource listed here is not as described, please contact Free Spirit Publishing.

Edited by Alison Behnke

Cover and interior design by Courtenay Fletcher

Images from iStockPhoto

Free Spirit Publishing

An imprint of Teacher Created Materials

9850 51st Avenue North, Suite 100

Minneapolis, MN 55442

(612) 338-2068

help4kids@freespirit.com

freespirit.com

Contents

PART I. LINER NOTES

WORDS FROM THE FAM	X
INTRODUCTION <i>Taking it back to the old school and where this story begins</i>	XIV

PART II. ORIGIN STORIES

CHAPTER 1: “A CHANGE IS GONNA COME”	2
<i>A call to action—to embrace arts-based education and reach students through the framework and culture of hip-hop</i>	
CHAPTER 2: FROM CHATTEL TO CHARTER SCHOOLS	18
<i>The history of the US educational system and its impact on our national aptitude</i>	
CHAPTER 3: FROM GLYPHS TO GRAF	31
<i>The role of the arts in our lives to tell stories, express ourselves, and uncover our shared humanity</i>	
CHAPTER 4: FROM NATURE TO NEUROSCIENCE	43
<i>Evidence-based findings about behavior and the brain and how this plays out in classrooms</i>	

PART III. THE BLUEPRINT

CHAPTER 5: HIP-HOP HOORAY	58
<i>How a micro-culture became THE culture that can transform education</i>	
CHAPTER 6: THE FIVE ELEMENTS OF HIP-HOP AS AN EDUCATIONAL FRAMEWORK	81
<i>Emceeing, Deejaying, Graffiti, Breakin’, and Knowledge of Self</i>	
CHAPTER 7: CRAFTING THE ARTS-BASED, CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE, AND RIGOROUS LESSON	112
<i>Intro, Verse, Coda, Remix, and Samples</i>	

PART IV. CODA

CHAPTER 8: IT LIVES WITHIN ALL OF US	142
<i>Sometimes it is the hard times that show us the path forward</i>	

PART V. LANGUAGE LEARNING & SHOUT-OUTS

LEXICON	148
FURTHER READING	150
REFERENCES	152
INDEX	164
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS: GIVING FLOWERS	172
ABOUT THE AUTHOR	174

"IF A CHILD CANNOT LEARN IN THE WAY
WE TEACH, WE MUST TEACH IN A WAY THE
CHILD CAN LEARN." —Dr. O. Ivar Lovaas

PART I
**LINER
NOTES**

Words from the Fam

BY WILL A. MILES

The reason I love rap is . . . the rap. Like, the part when people say words over a beat. And I know you're probably thinking, "Yeah, that's the whole point of rap. Congratulations." And honestly, that's maybe kind of mean and you've made me sad. Because I *do* get an amazing feeling when a rapper uses a metaphor that really makes me think, and sometimes even makes me laugh. I can't describe the feeling, but many people have told me that some of the best things in life give you feelings you can't quite express with words. (And those were smart people!)

Hip-hop gives me that feeling. Lyrics give me that feeling. Some of my favorite rappers were some of my best teachers. I had some great teachers in school, but I learned more about the Harlem Renaissance from Common than I did in class. I went to some of the best schools in the country, but the things I learned from KRS-One about self-preservation continue to linger in my brain today. And as a comedian and writer with an English degree, I've read some of the best books in the world, but in conversation, I am far quicker to quote my favorite storyteller, Nas, than any of those books.

The author of *Gotta Stay Fresh* understands this. And the author of this book knows how to use that connection and make magic with it. That author is the one and only Fresh Professor himself, Mr. James Miles. The dude who did his undergrad at Morehouse, his grad studies at Brandeis, and also the man who introduced me to hip-hop when he brought home that first cassette by The Pharcyde. The guy with the TEDx Talk who also happens to be the same guy who helped Bobby Shmurda's friends finish high school when he taught them in the East New York and Brownsville neighborhoods of Brooklyn. And this book is his life's work. When I say life's work, I don't mean this is the full scope of what he can do. He has many more minds to open. But this is an incredible example of his genius, and now the world gets to see it.

Using hip-hop to teach is something I've been watching James do for almost forty years. It's also a big reason I am the man I am today. As my big brother, he was my first tutor. The guy who used my love of the cartoons *Doug* and *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* to help me get through elementary school. The guy who used Common lyrics to help me find interest in the play *The Amen Corner* when I was in high school. He's always been the Fresh Professor to me.





For a short period of time, I worked for James. He was in charge of a program in New York City called Fresh Prep that went into schools, adjusted curriculum to the needs of the students, and got results. I was one of the teaching artists hired to implement Fresh Prep's strategies into the classroom. I would see the kids tighten up when I walked in, and then quickly loosen up when I asked them about themselves.

Another great icebreaker was when students noticed my sneakers. I always made sure to wear fairly obscure but cool-looking Nikes. I'm a product of early 2000s Pharrell, so I almost had no choice but to buy Dunks the first time I got consecutive paychecks. And on my first day with Fresh Prep, one of the students said, "Ohh, mister got the nice Dunks with the scribbles." (These were the black Neckface Dunk Highs.) I responded, "Yeah, I got these over by Supreme." Almost immediately the whole class relaxed, and kids started asking me about myself. Then I used that momentum to switch gears and get into the history lesson. Throughout the rest of the semester, a lot of those kids would check in with me every day at school during office hours. I felt like we were connected. I felt like I got them.

The thing is, I only learned those strategies when I got to shadow my brother in one of his classes before I started working. He immediately got the students to engage. I saw the passion behind how he listened to them and how they responded. I watched as he helped their minds grow. He knew how to run the classroom in a way I hadn't really experienced growing up. Even my most beloved teachers didn't always look like him. And I saw those kids' faces. He got them.

“James immediately got the students to engage. I saw the passion behind how he listened to them and how they responded. I watched as he helped their minds grow.”



Part of my motivation to work harder in comedy came when my brother and I sat down and I said, "I don't have the same love you do for teaching." And he said "Yeah, I know. So does everyone at work." Then we laughed. I had watched education become his new love and I watched him continually excel in it. I saw love and passion when he was an actor, too, but there was a very different spark when he found his place in the classroom and began developing curriculum. He was lighter. Maybe happier. It seemed like he had discovered what he was put here to do. And I knew he was going to make an impact. I knew it right then and there. I left our talk



knowing that if my love was comedy, I had to treat it as such. James and I always had the full support of our parents in whatever path we followed in life, and they did a great job making sure we knew that. Still, sometimes I needed that third kick in the ass to finish the job. Call it the little brother's plight. But it worked. After that talk, I had a new spark. Within a couple of months I got my first TV writing job. And luckily for both of us, it meant he didn't have to fire me.

I continue to learn from James. He is truly a genius. He is a dedicated advocate for all youth. He is one of the foremost minds on culturally responsive pedagogy. That's why people all over the world, from politicians to colleges and universities to corporations reach out to him constantly. After you finish this book (or before!), watch his TEDx Talk on YouTube. I was there as he gave it, and definitely welled up as I watched him kill it onstage and then be mobbed offstage by adoring intellectuals, security guards, and event employees alike. I couldn't have been prouder of someone. Happier for someone. Because aside from all those other great things about him? He's also the best brother anyone could ever have. He's my big brother.

Now go enjoy this book. And for God's sake, use it in your classroom.



Introduction

Taking it back to the old school and where this story begins

"DO I LIVE HERE NOW?"

I spent most of my childhood in a Chicago neighborhood called Wrigleyville, on the north side of the city. Chicago is well known as the city of neighborhoods—generally segregated by race and income. Yet my family and I felt welcome in our mostly White, middle class, and queer neighborhood, and we lived there without much conflict. When I was very young, my father was a new lawyer, working long days as new lawyers do. So I spent a lot of my time hanging out with my mother, or alone with my thoughts, playing with G.I. Joe and Transformers. I also have fond memories of Chicago Cubs games (and I remain a diehard Cubs fan), gay pride parades, and playing with neighbor kids in empty parking lots. It was a safe and content existence for a young child in the early 1980s.

Then, one sunny September, my mother and I left our apartment in Chicago and took the bus to some magical and supposedly amazing place where I would experience new and fun activities: kindergarten. It was my first day of school ever. When we arrived, I turned to my mother and said, "Do I live here now?" With tears in her eyes, she said, "Of course not. You are just going to school here. I will pick you up in a few hours." I calmly replied, "Okay."

And with that, I turned and walked into school and straight into my classroom—without looking back, and without a care in the world. I'm not sure what that says about my perspective on life at five years old. Was I really so ready to leave my parents and never see them again? For years, I thought it might mean I was lacking emotional connection, or that I was trying to escape from something deep in my subconscious, or that I hoped that I would now live with nine hundred other kids. What I now realize is that I was seeing my future passion open up right in front of me. I looked at school and I felt that I was home. School *has* been my home. It is where I live and where I will always live.

And yet, school didn't always feel welcoming.

Early on, I was placed in some special education classes because of a speech impediment. Every week I'd have speech lessons where I tried sounding out words. At first, all my classes were different from those of my friends; later I was integrated



into general education classes and pulled out to work on certain word sounds. As my impediment lessened, I was pulled out of my mainstream classroom less and less, and eventually not at all. But I still didn't talk much in class. I felt like I didn't have much to offer, even though many teachers provided a space for me to share.

I think part of my reticence to speak came from noticing how a lot of teachers treated certain kids differently based on the way they looked, the way they dressed, the way they spoke English, or the way they processed information. Because I was shy and I pretty much followed the rules, some teachers missed the fact that I was in both general education and special education classes, which provided me with a unique vantage point. The same teacher who was endearing and warm to students in the general education setting might ridicule and dismiss the students in special education classes. I also observed the way, as my friends and I got older, we were placed into different groups: the "regular" class, the "gifted" class, or the "slow" class. These designations had very little to do with us as individuals, but instead were based on what we happened to know—and were able to demonstrate—at a certain time, on a certain day, in a given year. Thus, one of the first big lessons I learned in class was that school was not about learning. It was about categorizing.

Even at a young age, that ran against my own sense of morality and rightness. I knew I wanted to shift that narrative, and I knew I would devote my life to it. I believe school should be a community, full of engaged young people and caring adults. Adults who care for those young people, teach them, feed them, keep them safe, guide them, advise them, love them.

And this isn't only my personal belief. It's also borne out by the data. According to research, when young people feel both a strong sense of belonging at school as well as a strong sense of identity, it helps them "develop positive self-regard and connections with others in academic settings" (Chun et al. 2016, 395). Research also states that when young people are valued at school, it "helps students maintain emotional stability, enjoy their learning experiences, develop optimistic attitudes towards learning, and attach to peers who share a similar stable and positive spirit" (Ibrahim and El Zaatari 2020, 384).

My second-grade teacher, however, provided an example of the exact opposite. She was a very cold teacher, steeped in the traditional educational model of teaching that put her at the front of the room speaking to her class, rarely tolerating questions, and expecting all her students to practice rote memorization. To say I was bored in school that year is an understatement. This teacher was clearly reviled by many students, yet this seemingly didn't faze her. No matter how many questions were raised, no matter how often someone said they didn't understand a concept, she maintained the same approach and the same pace of instruction.



I felt unwelcome in that class, and it was the first time in school that I didn't get an A. I wasn't alone in my experience. My friend Hillary was top of the class and completed her assignments quickly. Once when we were taking a test, Hillary finished before everyone else. As the other students were still working, Hillary turned her test in and opened a book to read. Our teacher promptly admonished her for doing outside work and sent her to the principal's office. Hillary was a straight-A student who had never been disciplined in school. That day, she looked downtrodden as she left the classroom. Her spirits were broken, and she cried and cried. Though this may be an extreme example of an unwelcoming classroom environment, universal conformity is still considered the gold-star standard in some school systems. Even top-performing students like Hillary suffer from this approach.

Years later, when I was an educator supporting the teaching practice of other educators, I worked with another teacher who was a fan of using a uniform, one-size-fits-all model. She was set in her ways, had taught the same lesson for years, and was deeply skeptical of bringing art—*especially* hip-hop—into her classroom of sixth graders. She thought there was no value to hip-hop music and considered it a distraction from academic studies.

The principal who brought my team and me into the school told us this teacher would be the most difficult convert to our youth-centered and arts-based approach, yet said she would also benefit the most from it. During our first several interactions, she balked at having to attend the mandatory trainings we led. "This won't work." "This is a waste of time." "My students need to pass the test, not play games."

This type of reaction wasn't new to me. In fact, I'd come to expect some resistance whenever I approached administrators and teachers about utilizing hip-hop in schools, because of the negative associations some folks have with hip-hop culture. But usually when they were able to see the practice in action, their attitudes would change, and I was hoping the same would happen with this sixth-grade teacher. I felt like I was making progress—however small—when, after a few weeks of pushback, she relented and allowed us to show what this practice looks like with actual students. Feeling hopeful, my colleague John Robinson and I went into one of her classes and did an introduction to our approach. The students were interested, but I have to admit they didn't appear as excited as we had hoped. The teacher looked at us with a smirk as if saying, "I told you so."

What John and I quickly realized was that hearing us talk about hip-hop education wasn't nearly as exciting as actually participating in a hip-hop ed class. John is one of the most amazing educators I know, and he is also an acclaimed emcee with a phenomenal ability to freestyle, or improvise, lyrics off the top of his head. I took a chance. I asked the class what they were studying in social studies that



week, which was US colonialism. Then I turned on some instrumental music and John proceeded to freestyle about US colonialism for sixty seconds. The students' eyes widened and they began to nod their heads. They followed along to the lyrics, tapped their feet, and began smiling.

I could tell from the teacher's eyes that she was tracking this student engagement, and she looked impressed but not converted. It was clear she would need to see more. So John visited her class twice a week for the rest of the school year. He later told me it took three months before she finally acknowledged the impact of our approach. And while she was never going to become an emcee, she *did* start bringing youth culture into her classroom and utilizing simple arts-integrated practices like Role on the Wall and In Role (you'll read more about these in chapter 7). The students were more engaged in the lessons, felt a greater sense of belonging, and experienced greater comprehension of academic content. In the end, this teacher became one of our biggest advocates because she was able to see firsthand how this type of work helped her students.

"Did I Do That . . . ?"

During my own school days, it took a while before I had a couple of teachers who really saw me and pushed me. These experiences impacted the rest of my life. And here again, research clearly shows I'm not alone in this. According to the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), "Students thrive when teachers know them well, and affirm their individual and diverse identities (Steele and Cohn-Vargas 2013 in Darling-Hammond et al. 2017). Teachers who affirm students' identities communicate in ways that show that they genuinely care for and respect each student, and that they believe all students' knowledge, lived experiences, and culture are an asset to the classroom community" (CASEL 2021, para. 3).

For me, one of those affirming teachers was Ms. Barth, who taught fourth grade. While preparing for a social studies project on Europe, I told her I knew a couple words of Russian and German from comic books. In response she encouraged me to write an essay on how comic books could be educational. She gave me an A on that paper, and in doing so showed me that school and youth culture don't have to be at odds. On the contrary—youth culture can be used to support academic outputs and comprehension.



Then there was Mr. Pickett. He taught fifth- and sixth-grade math, and he was my first and only Black male educator until I was in high school. He made me appreciate math, and he did so with humor. When I was older, I even briefly became a junior accountant at the Chicago Mercantile Exchange thanks to Mr. Pickett's influence.

In eighth grade, Ms. Baumann was my history and art teacher. She had taught the same curriculum for decades—and in some areas, you could tell. We learned ballroom dancing, studied choral singing, and imitated Renaissance painters. However, Ms. Baumann also had a dry sense of humor that made the boring content engaging. Most importantly, she treated every student as an individual, while also challenging us to be our best. While my speech impediment was mostly gone by eighth grade, I was still shy and reluctant to speak in most situations, especially group settings. In fact—while I know this may be hard to believe for those who know me as Mr. Loquacious now—I rarely said more than thirty words a day when I was younger. Ms. Baumann, though, was very attentive, and she saw that the words I *did* speak had my friends doubled over with laughter. During prep for the school talent show, she asked me to host the whole show. I just stared at her for a while, unable to believe what she was suggesting. She said, “You’re very funny. I think the audience should see you up there.”

I continued to stare at her.

Then she said, “I know you’re good at impressions, so I think you should host the show as Steve Urkel.”

I finally broke my silence. “You mean Steve Urkel from *Family Matters*, the TV show?”

“Yes, son. I know you will be great.”

When I went home to tell my family, they wanted me to do it and thought it would be helpful for me. But I remained incredibly reticent, with no desire to step in front of a crowd. Then my family asked me to do an Urkel impression. Reluctantly, I said, “Did I do that?” I saw my little brother giggle, which in turn made me laugh. I told them I would think about it, and pondered Ms. Baumann’s words as I fell asleep. When I woke up, I still didn’t want to do it. And when I went to school, Ms. Baumann told me the most important thing a person can do is take risks.

As you may have guessed by now, I went through with it. Not without much consternation—and not without consistent, supportive messages from my family and Ms. Baumann. But in the end, I hosted the show as Steve Urkel. And not only did the audience love me (obviously!), I found out I was pretty good at it. It was a breakthrough for me—which is the power of the arts. I was challenged to think outside of myself, and to place myself in a new situation. And I was asked to believe in myself, which boosted my confidence. If not for that performance, I wonder what



would have been different in my life. I feel almost certain that without it—along with the influence of Mr. Pickett’s math instruction—I would not have been confident enough to take that junior accountant job. Nor would I have had the confidence to then leave accounting and become a professional actor. I took yet another risk when I quit acting to devote myself to a career in education.

When an adult believes in a young person—especially when that adult is a role model like an educator—it presents the powerful opportunity to break through to new ideas and create change.

And here’s a truth for you: *Every educator has the capacity to see a young person for who they are and accept them—without trying to change them or asking them to fit in.* If we’re lucky, each of us had at least one educator who saw our interests and built off them to empower us and give us a platform for self-expression.

“Every educator has the capacity to see a young person for who they are and accept them—without trying to change them or asking them to fit in.”



A case in point: As mentioned, my speech impediment and a stutter resulted in a mostly quiet childhood. I didn’t want to talk very often, though my parents were very supportive. What I *did* love was watching movies and TV shows, especially those featuring Robin Williams. *Mork & Mindy* was my favorite show, and I watched the *Popeye* movie every time it was on. I mimicked the physicality of Robin Williams as Popeye, down to emulating the eye squint and borrowing my grandfather’s pipe as a prop. I would walk around the house doing prank falls and cracking up my parents. It was my form of communication—a way to keep my family laughing while not having to actually speak. This remained my *modus operandi* for years. That is, until 1985, when Slick Rick and Doug E. Fresh released the record “La Di Da Di.”

Hip-hop had been a burgeoning musical genre since its debut in 1973, but nothing before this song had ever sounded so original and fresh. Doug E. Fresh beatboxed while Slick Rick rapped melodically over the beat. As soon as I heard that song, I began to try to beatbox as well as Doug E. Fresh, which was almost impossible—but I still practiced daily. When my mouth got tired, I would recite the lyrics silently. At first, my parents were mostly amused by my raps. But we soon realized that by beatboxing and rapping, I was exercising my lips, tongue, and mouth.