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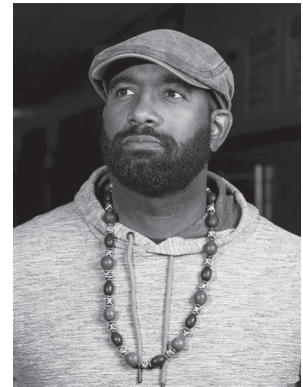
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In Demand: The Education Cypher

by quan neloms



Photo credit: kieferpix



quan neloms

I came of age during the 90s in the city of Detroit during a time that was affectionately known as the “golden age” of hip hop. I was of course very interested in the cultural engagement and excitement going on in my city. My friends and I would frequently visit the Hip Hop Shop, Café Mahogany, and countless open mic spots. Being thoroughly engaged with all that was going on, I went from being a spectator to picking up a pen and pad and becoming a full participant in the art and expression of hip hop. And, I was not the only teenager at the time who decided to expand my vocabulary and lift my voice to join the cypher, which was ever present at school lunch tables, at the mall, onboard buses, at the neighborhood community center, etcetera.

A cypher is defined as a gathering of people, usually

in a circle, for the purpose of rapping, beatboxing, or breakdancing. The cypher is a place to display talent but also a place to be heard, for ideas to be spread, and for spectators to be called out to become participants.

Currently, Black men constitute only 2% of America’s teaching force. Although research has proven that the overall achievement of students, especially Black male students, increases every school year in which they are enrolled in classes taught by Black male teachers, the shortage still remains.

With that said, earlier this summer I designed an initiative known as In Demand that seeks to uplift Black men who are already involved in education. This initiative also seeks to recruit Black men as educators,

mentors, and volunteers within schools. Men respond to being challenged and called to act. Knowing this, I wanted to use the cypher concept to put out a call for Black men. And, not just any cypher but an education cypher—an edu-cypher.



Photo credit: Jared Davis

The purpose of the edu-cypher is to be heard and to call those who are spectators to education to become participants. Since the summer, *In Demand* created two edu-cyphers: “In Demand” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tvOIuUckAN0&t=240s>) and “The Call” (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tD_s4rZI-x0) The lyrics of my verse “In Demand” really get to the heart of what I hope to achieve through this work.

As an educator, I find annotating rap lyrics to be an important tool for engaging students as well as promoting critical thought and collaboration. Also, the aforementioned skills can be applied to passages from books, speeches, magazine articles, journal entries, etcetera. A helpful website for educators interested in utilizing the analyzation and annotation of rap lyrics, and other literary works, is www.genius.com. Annotating lyrics allows students, as well as adults, to have their voices clearly heard and understood. Below you will find my annotated verse from “In Demand.”

“In Demand”

“Indeed I’m that 2 percent,”

The current percentage of Black male teachers nationwide. This is the reason for the In Demand movement: to increase the number of Black men involved in education.

“16 years of impacting students”

Since 2003 I have been an educator within Detroit’s public-school system. Despite our numbers being small, Black men are in the profession and are making a major impact on students and on the profession as a whole.

“For this decision they said that I was foolish”

Many laughed, and some literally said the decision was foolish when I informed those around me that I was leaving my college engineering program to pursue a degree and subsequent career in education. But my time as a volunteer and mentor in a community school after my freshman year showed me a way forward in serving my community unlike anything I’d ever experienced.

“If not us then who else is going to do this”

No one else can have an impact on the profession like Black male educators. The talent, skill, intellect,

ingenuity, and concern we bring to classrooms is necessary and needed.

“Teach ‘em life, teach them right, what the truth is”

As a teacher, I consistently advocated for and created culturally relevant lessons. As experts we know how to take curriculum and make it culturally relevant. As Black people are consistently misrepresented and overlooked in media and textbooks, I always made sure that the culture of my students was not overlooked or minimized.

“SMD, Brightmoor is the blueprint”

I was a volunteer at a local church within the Brightmoor community of Detroit—Rosedale Park Baptist Church—and it had a tremendous presence in the community due in large part to its relationships with local schools and residents. I was able to volunteer at one of those schools where I worked closely with middle school students. Because I volunteered in the school and in the community, I was able to interact with students in both settings. This community approach to student engagement became my professional blueprint.

“Project A.D.A.P.T., Mama Rush was the blueprint”

As a teenager I was involved in an afterschool program known as Project A.D.A.P.T. (Awareness, Development, Achievement, Pride, and Teamwork). The program was led by the phenomenal Ms. Yvonne Rush, rest in peace. Mama Rush’s stated mission was to create a global mindset in Detroit’s youth. One way in which she accomplished this was through exposure to the arts, travel, lectures, etcetera. Needless to say, my life was forever changed by this program and the development of a global mindset within Detroit’s youth is another important aspect of my blueprint as an educator.

“Now here we stand on the cusp of a movement”

In Demand seeks to significantly increase the number of Black men involved in education in the Detroit area. Although the process has begun, we will be having an official launch for this initiative in January of 2020. Stay tuned to www.Iamindemand.com.

“That’s education verses schooling”

Schooling is learning that prepares you for work but

doesn't necessarily prepare you for life. W.E.B. DuBois said, "Education must not simply teach work—it must teach life." Therefore, education goes beyond the school walls and impacts the lives of educators, students, families, and the community as a whole. The education that Dubois referenced has serious ripple effects and Black men must be included in significant numbers in order for true education to occur.

“Recruiting legacy, heart, intelligence, integrity”

It is not enough to be an educator who is a Black man. You have to have the heart to drive you, the intelligence that makes you thrive, and the integrity that allows you to build trust and relationships with students and families.

“Wherever it be, whenever we see men on the front lines the better we’ll be”

Raising the percentage of Black men in education not only benefits Black children but benefits all children. Diversity in education promotes diversity throughout life.

“Psalms eighty-two verse three: The whole hood is waiting on you, achi”

This scripture from the Bible admonishes leaders to defend and advocate for those who are in need. For me, becoming an educator was not just a career path but a calling placed on my life by God—a ministry and a divine purpose. Throughout American history, Black culture has set trends that the nation and the world have followed. What better trend to set then uplifting the importance of solving issues in education? Not only is the hood waiting, but the nation is waiting for the answer.

“When the elephants return, their relevance returns, their presence is affirmed”

I love animals and as a young man I spent countless hours watching programs about nature on public television and the elephant always stood out to me. Survival habits and skills are not instinctual for young male elephants. Instead they learn to survive by watching older elephants as they go about their daily routines. Obviously, we are not elephants, but their example applies. It is important for our young men to see Black men portrayed in a positive light rather than constantly being bombarded with negative images. The Black male presence in education assists in changing the narrative and image of Black men.

Stand up it’s our turn

This is the call and the challenge to all Black men to join the cypher, the edu-cypher, and get involved in the field of education.

Author Biography

quan neloms is a 17-year educator whose work focuses primarily on boys and men of color and community partnerships. quan is the founder of Lyricist Society, a program that uses creative mediums to uplift student voice, and In Demand, an initiative with the goal of attracting more Black men to education as volunteers, mentors, and teachers. He can be reached at info@iamindemand.com.



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