



## EDUCATOR GUIDE



### WELCOME TO THE CYPHER

by Khodi Dill • illustrated by Awuradwoa Afful

**GENRE:** picture book, children's fiction

**THEMES:** music, communication, language, culture, community, belonging, peer relationships, self-esteem: finding and using your voice, emotions, and feelings

**SUITABLE FOR:** Pre-K–2, Ages 4–7

**GUIDED READING LEVEL:** Fountas and Pinnell I

**LEXILE:** AD590L

**COMMON CORE STANDARDS:** CCSS.ELA-Literacy Strand-Reading literature: RL.1.1,2,3,4,5,6,7,9  
W.1.1,3,5,6  
SL.1.1,1a,1b,1c,2,3,4,5,6  
L.1.4,4a,4b,4c,5,5a,5b,5c,5d,6

#### SUMMARY:

The story introduces the culture of rap music as a genre. The children in the book learn about using the power of words to give voice to their feelings. “Li’l one” is invited to follow the rhythm and come on inside the cypher, where readers learn how to use words to create imagery, build community, and harness the power of their voice. The characters use poetry and rap to exercise their freedom of speech, express themselves, and communicate their emotions.

Readers journey with the children in the story as the world of rap is opened to them. Rap culture is conveyed through images, words, and verse construction.

Please remember that the suggested questions and activities within this educator guide are meant to serve as a starting point. Educators are encouraged to select items from each part of the guided inquiry process that work best for their style of teaching and will help them meet their goals when covering the topics in this book. Activities and prompts should be tweaked and/or reformatted to best fit your students, context, and community to ensure equity and inclusion.

## BEFORE READING THE BOOK

These activities build the context, introduce the topic of the book, and establish prior knowledge and interest.

1. Invite the students to look at the cover. What do they observe? Encourage the students to notice/talk about the different children on the cover. Do they see someone who looks like them? Ask them why it is important to see themselves represented.
2. What do they think the book might be about? Discuss the title. Does anyone know what “cypher” means? Encourage them to guess. Explain that the word means a freestyle rap session with rappers that generally goes in a circle. Ask the students again what they now think the book might be about.
3. Read aloud the names of the author and illustrator. Do their names tell us about them or about the story? Emphasize the importance of hearing from people who have different experiences than we do.
4. Explain that we are going to learn about the role of music in different cultures. There are many different cultures in our community, our country, and around the world. There are many ways to express culture, for example, music, food, and in the way people dress. No culture is better than another, just different. Ask the students to share something about their culture.



# WHILE READING THE BOOK

These activities check on comprehension, stimulate interest, involve readers in reflection as they read, and encourage consideration of other readers' reactions.

1. In the opening sentence of the book, the man says “Yo, l’il one!”
  - What does the way the man speaks tell us about the book? What does he mean?
  - Ask your students if they know someone who expresses their culture through language in a similar way.
2. In the beginning of the book the man tells the children to follow him and tells them what to look for.
  - How do we begin to know that the book is about music?
  - Did you know what kind of music he was talking about? How did you know?
3. On the next page, we are asked to use our imagination about words.
  - What do you think boom-bap means? Do you think it is a real word?
  - Boom-bap is a style/sub-genre of hip hop characterized by hard-hitting drums. Is it easy to create words and give them meaning?
  - Ask the students to imagine words and give them definitions. Ask if they found it easy or hard to do.
4. In the book, the man says, “Are you down?” Read the page for context; this can mean different things in different cultural contexts.
  - Ask the students what the sentence could mean and what it means in the story.

A lot of imagery is used in these two pages that start with “Say word. Come on, yo!” For example, how does the author make us think about water by using words on this page?

- Ask the students to identify the words used.

The pages also introduce the subject of emotions as we read about “emotions that roar!”

- What feelings do “emotions roaring” make students think about?
- Ask the students about a time when their emotions roared and how it made them feel.
- What words (metaphors) can they use to express their emotions/behaviour, e.g., as quiet as a mouse?

5. In the story, the beatboxer is a girl.

- Ask students if that surprised them. If yes, why?
- Are girls normally cast in these roles in stories? This example can be used for conversations around gender.

Also see extension activities.

6. Ask students what they think the line “embrace the true meaning of freedom of speech” means.

- Why is freedom of speech important?
- Ask students to think of a time when they couldn’t say what they wanted to, maybe to their parents during a disagreement. How did it make them feel?

7. In the picture when l’il one is holding the microphone, she appears nervous.

- What is l’il one being encouraged to “let out” and how does she look afterwards?
- Ask students what they think the author means by heat.

8. Think of *The Little Engine That Could* and the mantra the little engine says over and over again: “I think I can, I think I can, I think I can.” The man gives the children a mantra when he talks about the cypher as being “a home for your voice . . .” Read the mantra aloud.

- Ask students if they have a mantra.
- When do they use it? Think of the Little Engine and the mantra he used.

9. Ask your students if they were surprised when the author talked about rap music being like poetry. Did they know that rap is poetry set to a rhythm or beat?

- What other types of music culture can students name?
- What type of music do they like? Can they explain what they like about it? Is it the same music or different to other members of their household or friends?
- How do students express themselves, e.g., music, art, dance, etc.?

9. The final pages give a description of what it is like to belong in a cypher.

- Ask your students how this makes them feel.

## AFTER READING THE BOOK

These activities inspire continued reflection and response to the text, bring conclusion to the experience of reading this text, and stimulate further extensions.

1. Ask your students if they liked the story.

- What did they like/dislike about it?
- What did they learn?



2. The way the author uses words expresses his culture e.g., “Yo l’il one” and “Can you vibe with that?”.
- Brainstorm to see if the students can come up with words or phrases that might express their culture.
  - Have the students choose a subject and then call out words related to it. Write them down on a board, work together as a class to select five of their favorite words, and create a rap.
3. Although the story is centered around rap music, it touches on many different areas, like freedom of speech, finding your voice, and expressing your feelings.
- Discuss other music genres and explain that different types of music often represent different cultures, e.g., country music, punk rock, etc. Emphasize that just because you like one type of music, it doesn’t mean that other types aren’t any good. The world would be a very boring place if people were all the same and liked all the same things.
4. Ask students: Does having freedom of speech mean you should say whatever you want to people?
- Why might it not always be a good idea to say anything you feel like?
  - Have the students discuss the following scenarios and decide whether they should say something:
    - You see a stranger with hair that is yellow, orange, and purple with pink dots. Is it ok to point at them and say, “Look at their hair!”
    - You see something fall out of a lady’s bag and she doesn’t realize, should you say something?
    - Your friend ate spinach at lunchtime and got some stuck in their teeth.
    - Your teacher has their shirt on inside out.
    - You make a new friend who speaks differently from the way you do; you don’t always understand what they are saying. Should you tell them?

See extension activities for activities around diversity.

5. In one of the illustrations, the man is watering the grass and flowers that are growing up a door and forming a canopy over the children.
- Explain what you think is happening in the illustration. Use the words on the page to help you.
  - Draw a picture of a canopy over you and your friends doing something that you love. It doesn’t have to be flowers and grass; it can be anything you want it to be.

6. Ask students to use their voices to represent themselves.
  - Ask them to write a poem about something that they feel strongly about. It can make them happy, sad, angry, or any emotion they choose.
  - Suggest that students try rapping their poem. How did it make them feel to express themselves in this way?
  - Do they agree with the author about the power of rap?

## EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

These activities are only a start. They are designed to support the goal of helping students explore the story and their own creativity.

1. The female beatboxer provides a good opportunity to discuss gender and gender roles.

**Riddle:** A man and his son are in a terrible accident and are rushed to the hospital in critical care. The doctor looks at the boy and exclaims, “I can’t operate on this boy, he’s my son!” How could this be? **Answer:** The surgeon is his mother.

If the students answered correctly, congratulate them for not stereotyping gender roles. If the students guessed incorrectly, have a conversation about how they may have based their answers on stereotypes. Explain that a stereotype is a generally held belief about a particular group of people. Making a judgment about a person because they belong to a particular group is never a good idea. We should judge people by who they are, not what they are.

Ask the students to assign a gender to the following occupations:

- doctor      • nurse      • scientist      • teacher      • astronaut      • musician
- grocery store worker      • care assistant      • hairdresser      • plumber
- carpenter      • construction worker      • homemaker/stay-at-home parent

Explain that our society has accepted norms for gender roles but that is changing. Previously it was expected that certain genders did specific jobs—not because one gender performed the role better but because it was considered normal. People should be able to do any job they choose because they enjoy it, not because of their gender. Ask the students if they know anyone who works in a job not normally associated with their gender. Do they think gender should make a difference about who can do a job?

2. The discussion around the student who speaks differently than his friend provides an opportunity to explore diversity with the students.

Have the students draw a web diagram. In the middle circle they should write their name and share things about themselves that they feel comfortable disclosing: favorite genre of music, type of food they eat (include whether they are vegan/vegetarian, etc.) languages they speak, etc. In the remaining circles, they should repeat the categories they created for themselves. The students should be invited to fill the details for their friend group in the different circles, e.g., if Anwar is a vegetarian, “vegetarian” should be entered in the food circle. At the end of the activity the student should have a visual representation of the diversity in their friend group. Allow students to widen the activity to include people they know outside of the class if they wish to.

