Hip Hop Education and the Pursuit of Justice

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts
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2015

Abstract

Educators who choose to use Critical Hip Hop Pedagogy in their classrooms are committed to thinking creatively and alternatively on issues of curriculum content. This thesis investigates how that thinking is translated during moments of conflict, violence, disruption and disorder in the classroom. Choosing to utilize educators who have chosen to root their pedagogy in a practice that calls for a lens of social justice, I am interested in the ways that their strategies challenge, affirm, reinforce, subvert or align particular notions of justice.

As this research was inspired by my own personal experiences as an educator, I use personal reflection and narrative data analysis with other educators as method. The study
highlights the potential alignment of Critical Hip Hop Pedagogy and practices of restorative justice illustrating its capacity to develop more reflective, consistent and transformative practices for educators.
Acknowledgments

I recognize that I live a life filled with blessings that not many in this world get to experience. Attending post-secondary is a privilege and one that was only possible as a result of a village that has supported me, checked me, loved me and held me up. Thank you. This is for you. Thank you to the love of my life Kevin Hood for always making me believe that anything is possible. You are the magic I need to succeed. Thank you to my mummy for being my first cheerleader, my biggest defender and constant inspiration. Thank you to my entire Parris family, the Hood family, and all of my chosen family – especially my homegirls – I could not be without you.

Thank you to my supervisor Dr. Rinaldo Walcott for pushing me in all the best ways and always reminding me of the bigger picture. Thank you to Dr. Rubén Gaztambide-Fernández for agreeing to be my second reader and providing me with incredible notes that helped me to take my work to the next level. Thank you to Dr. Pedro Noguera for agreeing to be my host supervisor in New York and welcoming me into your classes and to the Metropolitan Centre for Urban Education. Thank you to the Centre for Urban Schooling and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council for investing in my work and development as a scholar.

Finally, I would like to thank my Lost Lyrics family. To my former students, the staff that I worked with and all of the volunteers: working, building, growing and collaborating with you has shaped the last decade of my life in ways I could never have imagined. This study is inspired by all that we lost and all that we built together.
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Chapter 1
Introduction and Rationale

School is like a 12-step brainwash camp/They make you think if you drop out you ain’t got a chance/To advance in life, they try to make you pull your pants up/Students fight the teachers and get took away in handcuffs/And if that wasn’t enough, then they expel y’all/Your peoples understand it but to them, you a failure – Dead Prez, “They Schools”

I was 17 years old when I first listened to the Dead Prez album Let’s Get Free. It was a pivotal moment. The unapologetic tone, aggressive beats, militant energy and well-researched lyrics transported me on a journey of revelation and reflections. I had just finished high school at a time when debates on having police in schools proliferated, a language of gangs and criminality was commonly employed to describe the student body by the school administration and the staggering absence of any of my Black male friends at my graduation ceremony had left me perplexed and distraught. This album put many of these recent experiences into a political and historical perspective. It succinctly named the institutions of schooling and prison as inextricably connected to a particular enterprise of social regulation, systemic exclusion and historical state building.

It was Hip Hop culture that first provided me with a language of critique for the processes of division that had become normalized in my experience of school. Hip Hop culture is populated by artists who over the years have repeatedly claimed ownership over the so-called troublesome student and have provided that student with a narrative voice and a context of emergence that is closely connected to related associations of criminality.¹ Hip Hop provided me with a lens of analysis through which to recognize that there was a correlation between the practices of disciplinary punishment within the school system and the bodies that are targeted by the prison industrial complex. As a cultural medium created through Diasporic channels to be a voice for marginalized and racialized communities, it is no coincidence then that Hip Hop culture in music, film and television has long been obsessed with the subjects of education and incarceration.

¹ Hip Hop musical artists who have explored the topic of education includes but is not limited to: KRS-One (“You Must Learn”, “Hole”), Poor Righteous Teachers, Public
Since the first listening experience of *Let’s Get Free*, I have been interested in drawing these connections. I have observed numerous members of my family, friends and students undergo the disciplinary practices of the school system. I have also observed many of them contained in varying levels of incarceration that include youth detention centers, jails, prisons and psychiatric facilities. I write with the memory of each of these people as potential rather than statistic, student rather than inmate and human being before they were ever classified deviant. I write with the experience of sitting in courtrooms, waiting rooms, lawyer offices, hospitals, halfway houses and visiting rooms. I write through the pain of communicating through letters, through phones, through glass, through silence, through blame, through projection and through glances and gazes across a courtroom. I write with an urgent need to know how the people I love got to these places and an urgent call to disrupt the patterns that ensure their return. This thesis is one step toward this.

This thesis is inspired by this context and by my direct experiences as a Hip Hop educator and subsequent research journey to document and investigate the potential of Hip Hop education in the task of social transformation. Specifically I will introduce the possible challenge Hip Hop educational spaces can pose to the punitive and exclusionary norms that constitute the cultural groundwork of the school to prison pipeline. I will also consider how the strategies employed by Hip Hop educators when dealing with conflict and violence in the classroom, have the potential to challenge general ideas of how justice is defined in contemporary North American society. This chapter will provide a brief introduction on the topic of this thesis and will detail the research questions that have shaped and informed the study. It will then move into a layered rationale for the topic utilizing personal experience and research literature to articulate the importance and relevance of this research.

### 1.1 Introduction to the Research Question(s)

This thesis considers the following research question: How do educators who use Critical Hip Hop Pedagogy reflect and define their response to moments of conflict, violence, disruption and disorder in the classroom? What pedagogical strategies have they devised
and how do they compare these strategies to those used by the larger educational institution they work with/for?

I am interested in discovering how Hip Hop educators address challenging student behavior and the ways that their choices are connected to prevailing discourse around education and justice. However as this study is not an ethnography where I sit and observer the methods of teachers, my focus is more specifically targeting the way that educators identify, define and reflect on these issues when they discuss their work. I will examine not only their approaches but also how they locate and articulate these approaches; determining whether they see them as in alignment, distinct from or in resistance to the policies and procedures taken by the institutions they work with/for. I am particularly interested in the ways that these chosen strategies are indirectly informed by educators’ larger understanding of justice and society.

The larger and more abstract guiding question for this research is: How are particular understandings of justice reproduced, challenged or innovated within learning institutions by educators who engage Critical Hip Hop Pedagogy?

By partially responding to this very large question through a very specific investigation, I am attempting to problematize how justice is abstractly understood and practically manifested in society through the reflections of these educators. I am interested in the ways that spaces outside of the criminal justice system operate discursively to legitimize and make intelligible the processes that are often taken for granted and rarely questioned inside the criminal justice system. For the purposes of this study I have decided to zero in on the classroom (largely defined as will be discussed later) and focus my lens on the perspectives provided by a specific group of educators facilitating these spaces. This study explores justice as a historically constituted concept and also as a practice embedded in normalized and everyday technologies of morality, regulation and management.

The questions guiding this research emerge from the recognition that educational institutions and spaces and the people that hold power in these spaces play a very prominent role in the legitimization and reproduction of culture and society. The decision to focus specifically on the experiences of Hip Hop educators is an
acknowledgement that learning spaces also share another common thread: the potential for disruption, questioning and innovation. This research specifically focuses on educators who have chosen to engage Critical Hip Hop Pedagogy as a strategy for pursuing a larger (often abstract) project of social justice education in the classroom. Critical Hip Hop Pedagogy recognizes the potential use “of Hip Hop as a liberatory practice…rooted in the long history of the Black freedom struggle and the quest for self-determination for oppressed communities around the world” (Akom, 2009, p. 53) This thesis then, attempts to discover how these individuals - who have consciously decided to create alternative learning spaces rooted in CHHP – reflect on the way that they address the unplanned moments that disrupt the classroom. When conflict, violence, disruption and disorder occur, do these educators believe that they continue to be alternative in the strategies they engage? What principles of justice become normalized and legitimized based on the choices made by these educators?

Due to my very limited capacity as a M.A. graduate student, this is a tiny exploration into one piece of a multi-layered research question. Other scholars will and I am sure have already embarked on more comprehensive and ambitious considerations of these and other related investigations. This qualitative research study is a hopeful and humble contribution to the growing field of educational research in Hip Hop based education. It is my hope that it will also have resonance in the fields of social justice education, and the growing and necessary scholarship on the school-to-prison pipeline.

1.2 Rationale. The Personal is Political: Lost Lyrics

My thesis research is personal. Everything that I invest my energy into has a degree of the personal, but the tendency to create divides and dichotomies between the private and public, the emotional and the rational and the scientific and the artistic sometimes blinds me from this pervasiveness.
I came to this thesis topic as a result of my experiences as an educator with Lost Lyrics\(^2\) a multi-award winning alternative education organization that I initially co-founded with my best friend Natasha Daniel. Lost Lyrics works with young people between the ages of 11-18 inside and outside of the formal school system. We were inspired to create Lost Lyrics as a result of our experiences with schooling; they differed significantly but we both held a shared feeling of dissatisfaction (her experiences were shaped by largely white suburban schools and my experiences of education were primarily in various inner-city urban schools filled with people of color). That dissatisfaction led each of us to develop independent educational experiences that truly sparked our capacity to be critical thinkers. We connected at a meeting of activists interested in working together to attend the World Festival of Youth and Students in Caracas, Venezuela and began exchanging novels, plays and music with each other. We attended meetings facilitated by Leninist-inspired activists and spoken word open mics. We traveled to Latin America (Venezuela, Colombia and Brazil) and Africa (South Africa and Kenya) with an agenda fueled only by curiosity, openness, eagerness and the overdraft of our debit cards, exploring graffiti movements and the spiritual root of capoeira. We snuck into expensive museums and symphonies and posed as Hip Hop journalists just to interview and learn from our favorite artists. We wrote and meditated, painted and danced, read and protested, all while attending class and taking exams that rarely left a mark beyond the day of testing. Inspired by this journey of self-directed learning we attempted to collaboratively construct our own alternative understanding of what a classroom experience should be. From the start, we knew that we wanted to develop learning spaces that encouraged critical thinking and nurtured the idea of learning as a process of questioning how that which is often deemed normative came to be, challenging the conventional order of things and creating alternative ways of relating, understanding and being. We wanted to disrupt the passivity that allowed for structures within society to remain unchallenged. The varied personal experiences of Natasha and I merged in our united dissatisfaction with school despite our on-paper success within educational institutions. As Patricia Hill Collins notes, “Public schools are largely designed to train students to fit into what already exists, not prepare them to imagine something different” (Collins, 2009, p.92) We

\(^{2}\) For more information on Lost Lyrics, please visit www.lostlyrics.ca
wanted to embark on a project of imagining something different from that which we had experienced in the schools we attended and something more aligned with the independent learning we had done outside of any educational institution. We decided that to do so, we would need to create learning spaces outside of the school system because it is these spaces, outside of public learning institutions, where educators have found room to experiment without fear of a particular kind of restriction. (Collins, 2009, p. 92-93)

One of the reasons we initially decided to make Lost Lyrics autonomous from the formal institution of schooling was because we were aware of the paradox in education James Baldwin noted during his 1963 paper “A Talk to Teachers”:

The paradox of education is precisely this – that as one begins to become conscious one begins to examine the society in which he is being educated. The purpose of education...is to create in a person the ability to look at the world for himself, to make his own decisions, to say to himself this is black or this is white, to decide for himself whether there is a God in heaven or not. To ask questions of the universe, and then learn to live with those questions, is the way he achieves his own identity. But no society is really anxious to have that kind of person around. What societies really, ideally, want is a citizenry which will simply obey the rules of society. If a society succeeds in this, that society is about to perish. The obligation of anyone who thinks of himself as responsible is to examine society and try to change it and to fight it – at no matter what risk. This is the only hope society has. This is the only way societies change. (Baldwin, 2008, p. 17-18)

When I graduated from high school, although my school was filled with numerous Black, Latino and Portuguese students, there was only one Black male in my graduating class. The others that had started high school at the same time as me four years prior had either dropped out or did not have enough credits to graduate with their class. This knowledge as I looked around on graduation day was a sobering reality check on the way those four years had sorted, socialized and socially controlled us to reproduce very particular roles in society. It made me wonder whether the school system had predisposed these young men to failure and dysfunction. However, I also stood at my graduation as valedictorian, questioning their absence in my speech, challenging and resisting structural expectations through my presence and voice. That understanding of these simultaneous yet contradictory realities had a fundamental impact on my perspective.
Building an alternative education organization based in Hip Hop culture for the past seven years with little to no mentorship from anyone who has embarked on a similar journey has meant a lot of experimentation; we figured things out through trial and error. One of the first decisions that we made as we attempted to create this alternative learning space was that education needed to be fun. As bell hooks states “the classroom should be an exciting place, never boring” (hooks, 1994, p. 7) As individuals who were inspired by and grew up with Hip Hop culture, we decided early on to engage it in the classroom as a tool of learning. At the time of our inception, there were few educational spaces engaging Hip Hop culture in Toronto and those that were, used it in a very mechanical way – simply adding various elements of rap music to a very strict literacy curriculum or were purely focused on supporting and developing youth into new Hip Hop artists. Using Hip Hop to develop a critical pedagogy was very much uncharted territory for us and those that had been doing this work were at the time unknown to us. A. A. Akom writes that:

CHHP (Critical Hip Hop Pedagogy) starts from the premise that Hip Hop is an important lens for socio-political analysis and presentation of marginalized communities, and that youth-driven research on Hip Hop and popular culture is an instantiation of reading and acting upon the world, that is, critical pedagogy. (Akom, 2009, p. 55)

The Lost Lyrics journey has been filled with numerous moments of incredible discovery and inspiring possibility. A few years ago, I taught a class on the prison industrial complex for a group of students between the ages of 11 and 14 as part of the Blueprint After School Program Lost Lyrics conducted in the community of Jane-Finch. As part of the session, we watched excerpts from a documentary called In Prison My Whole Life that utilized the case of political prisoner Mumia Abu-Jamal to highlight the various ways the prison industrial complex manifests itself in U.S. society. The visceral and impassioned response of the students is something I have never forgotten. Their indignation, outrage and most importantly their recognition of how they too were implicated in a justice system that legitimized this form of silencing and exclusion stunned me. Without resistance, all of them participated in the free-write following the film, one twelve-year old bursting her pen all over her hand because she was pressing down so vigorously on her paper. Their response to this film filled me with hope that
there is possibility for creating learning spaces that disrupt the reproduction of ordinary people willing to allow society to perish by unquestioningly obeying and normalizing its rules.

How was Lost Lyrics alternative to the mainstream school system? There were clear distinctions to the formal public educational institutions in various arenas: the content of our curriculum, the process of curriculum creation, the governance structure employed by the organization, our processes of student and staff evaluation, our calendar and our training. However, as James Joseph Scheurich (1994) notes, organizations such as Lost Lyrics are not alternative to the grid of social regularities but rather feed into it further. The language we had to use in order to legitimize funding for our programs such as describing our students as ‘high-risk’ or ‘marginalized’ consistently shifted the focus of blame on to the students, their parents, their cultures and sometimes even on the teachers, their school and their school administrators. In doing this we left “invisible the workings of the implicate social order.” (Scheurich, 1994 p. 310) As with many non-profits before us that began as activist movements and then transitioned into career organizations, Lost Lyrics was not forcing a transformation of educational institutions but rather was filling in their gaps by creating spaces that would be appendages for rather than challenges to the system. The realization of this unsettled me and pushed me to go to graduate school where I could find time and space to reflect and consider the larger purpose and intention of this work.

Lost Lyrics’ position as an alternative educational learning space was also challenged in the moments when the plans went out the window and space was disrupted by the inevitability of human conflict. In the moments when violence and disruption occurred in the learning space how did I deal with the management of behavior? All of our staff grew up attending mainstream educational institutions and these experiences propelled us but did not prepare us for this work. Certain decisions that we made in the first years of Lost Lyrics during those moments of disruption haunt me to this day. As alternative as we wanted and tried to be, when we were caught in a moment of conflict and stakes were high, we quickly realized that the easiest strategy was to go with what we knew. What we
knew generally turned out to be relying on practices of shaming (i.e. public humiliation, yelling at students) and exclusion (i.e., dismissal from learning spaces temporarily or permanently). As Paulo Freire notes in his seminal text *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*:

> But almost always, during the initial stage of the struggle, the oppressed, instead of striving for liberation, tend themselves to become oppressors, or “sub-oppressors.” The very structure of their thought has been conditioned by the contradictions of the concrete, existential situation by which they were shaped. Their ideal is to be men; but for them, to be men is to be oppressors. This is their model of humanity. (Freire, 1970, p. 45)

One of the students that I excluded from my classroom several years ago due to accusations that he had been violently bullying another student was shot and died in early 2013. I am haunted by the memory of my inability to respond to the situation in a way that was different from the responses he received every day in school. He was suspended regularly before dropping out of middle school and never made it into high school. I began to question what these experiences of consistent suspension and expulsion – in school and community learning spaces - taught him about justice and how they factored into his own meditations of how he engaged with the world in the fifteen years that he lived.

Before analyzing the perspectives of individual educators I would like to briefly make visible the structural, historical and systemic backdrop that discursively informs and shapes their context.

### 1.3 The Purpose and Function of Schooling

As one of the few institutions in both Canada and the United States that is mandatory for all children to participate in, and the primary institution responsible for ensuring the capacity and capability of the next generation to functionally participate as citizens in the nation state (Collins, 2009, p. x), the education system is a powerful site to situate a considered analysis of the ways that a society defines and articulates its principles around justice. There are undoubtedly numerous other spaces that shape and inform the socialization of young people including family, geographical and cultural community, the
media and religious institutions. The argument can also be made that because of the increasing pervasiveness of media and technology young people spend more time in front of screens than in schools (Zimmerman, 2014). However media is a large, diffuse and varied entity that the state has limited legislative control over. The public school system on the other hand, is the only state controlled institution that has the direct charge of shaping an entire society through the daily socialization of the next generation of citizens and political actors.

When one considers the history of schooling and the various ways the institution has been mobilized to legitimize and reproduce some of the most oppressive structures in society, it becomes clear that this is a site that requires more consistent critical analysis and interrogation. (Willis, 2003; St. Denis, 2007; Rousmaniere, Delhi and Ning de Coninck-Smith, 1997; Noguera, 2003; Kumashiro, 2009; Comeau, 2005; Collins 2009) In the first half of the twentieth century, all curriculum in North America was developed and conceptualized believing that hierarchy between races was a scientific fact and that the role of schooling was to support less-civilized races in the progressive development toward civilization (Tuck & Wang, 2012, p.77)

Theresa (pseudonym), one of the Toronto educators interviewed argued that the purpose of the current system of schooling is to prepare young people to participate in the economy and indoctrinate them in the specific values necessary to be considered successful. Her assertion is supported by the fact that generations of young people are taught that hierarchy, specialization and streaming are normal and rational parts of society. How they come to understand and make sense of these things occurs in part through the mythical concept of meritocracy; the bedrock of the grading system, the streaming system and the notion of specialization: “In a perfectly meritocratic society, IQ and effort determine individuals’ achievement in school, regardless of their class of origin” (Souto-Otero, 2010, p. 399) Despite the structural and interlocking realities of racism, class, gender and other forms of oppression that limit and marginalize opportunity, the belief that your success is defined in direct correlation to your effort and hard work remains a persistent and pervasive myth. Imbued with a discourse of equal
opportunity, the myth of meritocracy normalized in the public school system has become a fundamental tenet of the current democratic system and our related understanding of justice (Arvanitidis, n.d.; Bickmore, 2004; Collins, 2009; Conrad, 2006; Kumashiro, 2009; Noguera, 2003).

The schooling system is simultaneously inextricably connected to the development and maintenance of a particular type of citizen and worker needed for society in its current form to function. Jacqui Alexander writes in her chapter “Whose New World Order? Teaching for Justice”

The ideological attack against multiculturalism as superfluous curriculum makes a corresponding statement about the kind of worker that the transnational empire requires – a worker who fits into an already assigned place within the productive process, without a critical examination of how she got there and who is there with her…the economy requires a worker who naturalized upward mobility, who attributes it to merit, an explanation that often masks inequity. As Paulo Freire has observed, corporatization requires a “banking concept of education,” a mode of teaching in which knowledge is an investment, a set of received concepts that need not be subject to critical engagement or dialogic reflection. (Alexander, 2005, p. 106-107)

The acquiescent worker who does not threaten, question or challenge rules or structures enables a stable continuity. This type of worker is created when discourse functions as a pervasive force of immovability and permanence. Truth becomes the notion that the way things currently stand is the way that things have to be. Everything outside of this normative way of being is deemed unintelligible, radical, impossible or even criminal. Paulo Freire identified this when he wrote: “As long as their ambiguity persists, the oppressed are reluctant to resist, and totally lack confidence in themselves. They have a diffuse, magical belief in the invulnerability and power of the oppressor.” (Freire, 1970, p. 64) Through the consistent rewarding of acquiescence and punishment of noncompliance there is instilled a sense of the inevitability of power. Power suddenly becomes an object possessed by a select few, rather than an energy that is dispersed and strategically deployed. Once power is perceived as something that happens from above to us, it leaves little room to imagine (successful) resistance to it. The cultural hegemony that reinforces and reproduces the belief in this magic of power occupies space in the
structural dynamics and pedagogical strategies exercised in classrooms each day across North America, confining the realm of possibility and thereby making invisible the opportunities and openings for alternative ways of thinking, doing and creating. Stuart Hall importantly reminds us that:

Cultural hegemony is never about pure victory or pure domination (that’s not what the term means); it is never a zero-sum cultural game; it is always about shifting the balance of power in the relations of culture; it is always about changing the dispositions and the configurations of cultural power, not getting out of it. (Hall, 1993, p. 106-107)

It is within this context that I locate the work of the Hip Hop educators in this study. In the creation of alternative spaces they attempt to challenge the belief in this magic of power and create an opportunity for different pedagogical strategies to be realized.

1.4 Justice and Education

The common presence of police in schools as the first response for principals in disciplinary action, the increasing use of lawyers as everyday advocates for students, the correlation between exclusion and increased chances of incarceration and the legacy of institutions that were built as part of a colonial discursive apparatus illustrates that the notion of justice is shared by both the criminal justice system and the education system in Canada and the United States: “Since the 1990’s, lawmakers in the USA and Canada...have passed draconian laws aimed at regulating youth deviance and zero tolerance policies are now common approaches to dealing with minor transgressions and incivilities in schools across North America.” (DeKeseredy, 2009, p. 312) Similar to public perceptions of crime, although “available data and evidence show that the incidence of violence in schools is not rising, there is a growing perception that schools are more violent and dangerous than ever before.” (Noguera, 2003, p. 103) In the same ways that media outlets ignore the larger contextual and structural narrative informing these patterns, similarly much of the discourse in educational research and educational policy is deficit-driven thereby placing the blame and responsibility on student behavior and/or the disciplinary, cultural or interpersonal domain. Considering that as bodies that are raced, gendered and classed, the populations that receive consistent punishment in the
school system fit a similar discursive structure as bodies incarcerated within penal institutions (Noguera, 2003, p.342), it becomes apparent that particular social relations of power are being produced and reproduced from the classroom to the prison.

Following the 1996 amalgamation by the Ontario government of six metropolitan municipalities and, in 1998 their respective school districts, the Toronto District School Board became one of the largest in North America. (Bickmore, 2004, p.87) Kathy Bickmore notes that this amalgamation of six sets of board policies and the resultant budget cuts meant that the school board’s policy on discipline which had been orienting toward more inclusive, critical and restorative directions shifted drastically to an approach focused primarily on containment and security. (Bickmore, 2004, p.87)

Reports from school districts and school boards often measure the success of schools and students on the basis of categories such as test scores, credit accumulation, dropout rates, school attendance and suspension. According to the Toronto District School Board Achievement Gap Task Force Draft Report, since the 1980’s, Aboriginal, Black (African heritage), Hispanic, Portuguese and Middle Eastern students have held the lowest test scores, the lowest rates of credit accumulation through secondary school, the highest dropout rates, the lowest rates of school attendance and the highest suspension rates. (TDSB, 2010, p.3) These reports indicate a systemic trend of failure on the part of the school system to ensure the academic success of racialized students (according to these TDSB reports, all of the above named ethno-cultural communities are qualified as racialized groups – an interesting practice that seems to equate failure with racialization as I have never seen Portuguese students named as racialized anywhere else). Studies of school suspension have also found an overrepresentation of students from low socio-economic status who are more likely to receive disciplinary consequences (i.e. students who receive free school lunch in the United States have a higher risk of being suspended) (Skiba et al., 2002, p. 318-319, Townsend, 2000, p. 382). In the United States, approximately 1.1 million American high school students are pushed out every year. A student who has been pushed out of school is 8 times more likely to end up in prison than a high school graduate and nearly 20 times more likely than a college graduate. (Diaz et.
According to a report released by The College Board in 2011 “nearly half of young men of color age 15 to 24 who graduate from high school in the U.S. will end up unemployed, incarcerated or dead.” (Diaz et. al, 2011)

Through these reports, a deep-rooted sense of permanence is illustrated due to the fixed and unwavering shift in statistical data year to year. Hazel, a Toronto educator who works with the Toronto District School Board remarked during her interview:

I think the fact that the racialized dropout rates have had no change in 40, 50, 60, 70 years, considering the dynamics of the ethno-racial composition of our board speaks volumes….If you pulled out Black boys, which they would never ever do, I’m sure that number would be at least 65% if not higher.

Although the figures quoted by Hazel do not accurately reflect the statistical data that I have found in my research, her comment does illustrate that the only verified quantitative information we have at our disposal is the information that the state has been willing to release. As a critical insider within the system she recognizes what is left out of the dominant narrative.

1.5 Why Toronto and New York?

I decided to focus my ethnographic study on teachers who work in Toronto and New York. Toronto was selected because it is the place where I live, where I have learned and where I create. It is important for me to document the work of the communities that I am a part of and also to spend this privileged moment I have in the academy contributing to a reflective research process that will hopefully support and constructively interrogate the work that my colleagues and I have been engaged in and continue to do.

My decision to also connect with educators in New York was my attempt to pay homage and give respect to the city where Hip Hop culture coalesced and emerged as an expressive entity. Although I consider Hip Hop’s history as one that transcends the simplistic tale of four elements emerging from the boogie-down Bronx and rather as part of a larger tale of Black migrations, encounters, formations and resultant Diasporic
cultural inventions (Walcott, 2013, p. 170-171), I still acknowledge the location where meaning was ascribed through the naming and sharing of this things we now call Hip Hop. The development of New York’s Hip Hop based education movement is also older and more accelerated than Toronto so I saw it as an opportunity of learning and exchange between educators rather than a point of comparison and measurement by the researcher.

In choosing to focus my study on these two urban centers, I also wanted to challenge the nationalist agendas that often filter into academic scholarship and assert a more critical and transgressive approach that denied these borders the capacity to determine the boundaries of my research. As Rinaldo Walcott (2013) reminds us “Hip Hop is always already transnational” (p. 172) This transnational perspective requires a critical geography that “would need to move beyond the old maps, which mandate a nationalist curriculum. Our project cannot be circumscribed within the borders of the American nation-state, which are themselves shifting in relation to global changes, but whose task of making insiders and outsiders remains the same.” (Alexander, 2005, p. 108)
Chapter 2
Discursive Framework

2.1 Brief Background on the Journey to Theorize

Attempting to locate myself within the right discursive framework was one of the most challenging aspects of this research process. Spending so many years on the front-lines, I realized I was resistant to scrutinizing those experiences of heart-work under a microscope melded and formed in the armchair intellectualism of the academy even though, upon reflection I recognized all of the work I was doing had indirectly been informed and guided by theory. I did not want to get to the place that I observed many academics existing (un)comfortably in; working under the misguided belief that theory took precedence over the action. I also did not want to get into the seemingly obsessive work of academic deconstructing. The academy taught me how to break things apart while the community taught me how to build. The work of various feminists of color though illustrated to me that theory could be employed in the process of claiming “an existentialist position of deconstructing by constructing.” (Hurtado, 1996, p. 218)

I wanted to remain in a space of consistent engagement where I was inspired and encouraged to reflect and seek new ways of knowing and understanding; a public sociologist whose work was committed to supporting communities. I am a scholar whose recent desire to return to the academy was encouraged, fostered and inspired by the communities to whom I am indebted. My fear was rooted in a belief that I would create a research project inspired by community but immersed in so much theory that it would be past intelligibility. And if I am unintelligible to the very community that inspired and motivated my urgent need to research, then what is the point? Over time I was able to realize that academic language does not need to be unintelligible, but it is often nuanced because it is illustrating complexities often dismissed or disregarded when one is consumed with the action. As a result, it always needs to be substantiated and supported.

I also have to confront the fact that my fear of theorizing may also have emerged from a misplaced desire to remain within the discourse that frustrated me but constructed my
comfort zone: the language of social service. Within the social service/social work lens social issues are considered on a case-by-case basis. Focus is placed on the individual affects of structural conditions. Rinaldo Walcott expands this analysis to the field of sociology as a whole in his paper “Pedagogical Desire and the Crisis of Knowledge”:

I would like to suggest that the project of sociology as it is configured lends itself to a belief that, in studying “the real”, individual problems can be solved individually. I argue that sociology as a discipline despite its sometimes strong Marxist and feminist influences, inclinations and traditions – raising tough ethical questions – continues to organize world events as individuated projects in which people can take responsibility for individual problems. (Walcott, 2006, p. 66)

When I first began my degree, I knew quite clearly that I wanted to document and reflect on my experiences as an educator, but that terrain was so vast, I was not sure where I wanted to focus. The sudden violent death of my former student mid-way through the first year of my degree led me to recognize that my research was not going to be a congratulatory pat on the shoulder for the work that I have done but rather would be a critical examination into the mistakes, the challenges and the difficult moments that have pushed me to the brink and made me question the method and purpose of what I was doing. I knew also that this research would not be a case study of his individual life as would be encouraged in a social work/social service discourse or a self-centered analysis into my individual responsibility as an educator. His death however is inestimably credited with marking my research with a politics of urgency.

Viewing my research as urgent pushed me into feminist theory and specifically Aída Hurtado’s concept of endarkened feminist epistemology. Hurtado argues that research should be conducted as an urgent responsibility to community with the purpose of social justice toward liberation. An endarkened feminist epistemology argues for a paradigm of criticality and transformation. It allows me to recognize this journey as not simply intellectual but also as emotional and spiritual work that is inherently personal:

Theory lives in the body for women of colour. This is why the academy is so threatened by their presence and their work. “The Angry Black Woman” is a strategy of silencing but separating emotion from intellect is a concept of Eurocentrism; the rational and scientific over the emotional and intuitive. “Denial of emotion, spiritual needs and nurturance leads to both physical ailments and social destruction….To
claim the spiritual within the academy is blasphemous – undermines ‘scientific’ objectivity and leaves us bereft of method.” (Hurtado, 1996, p. 218)

I was determined to find a discursive framework that would push me to go beyond simply naming the problem. It was through assessing my data that I began to realize the theoretical frameworks that shaped and determined my gaze, my reading, my organization, ordering and understanding of the information and narratives. So my process was one where my framework was informed by my data rather than theory determining the data that I would gather.

This chapter illustrates the ways that various frameworks will be mobilized to provide an adequate lens from which to execute my analysis. It must be stated that the theories articulated in the academy are not the only ways of understanding and knowing that I call upon. Similarly to the journey Tricia Rose articulates in Black Noise I have endeavored to call upon “multiple ways of knowing, of understanding of interpreting culture and practice” and through this “polyvocal approach” I hope that I can adequately address “the deeply contradictory and multilayered voices and themes” (Rose, 1994, p. xii) that will emerge in this study.

Deciding to use my own experiences as data prevented me from holding the mythical position of objective researcher and forced me to turn the lens of analysis on to myself. In doing so, I rejected any position of innocence or exteriority in my research and attempted to be as critical of my own perspective as I am of the rest of the data. I had to make what was familiar strange and problematize what had become normal. It also made the interviews an interesting site of exchange as I recognized the intersubjectivity between us thereby releasing myself from any illusions of neutrality. Utilizing my own experiences alongside the narratives gathered through ethnographic research also forced me to problematize the notion of truth.

Utilizing a poststructural lens helped me to understand that truth can be seen as a constructed object rather than an abstract entity. Every idea, even the one’s we have about ourselves, has a history. Validity as Patti Lather argues, is not about right versus
wrong or true rather than false. Validity is multiple and partial and what we should be hoping to engage is a validity of transgression. (Lather, 1993, p. 680). However, these constructed ideas still have real and tangible effects for all who enact and are impacted by them:

According to Foucault, what we think we ‘know’ in a particular period about, say, crime has a bearing on how we regulate, control and punish criminals. Knowledge does not operate in a void….To study punishment, you must study how the combination of discourse and power – power/knowledge – has produced a certain conception of crime and the criminal, has had certain real effects both for criminal and for punisher, and how these have been set into practice in certain historically specific prison regimes. This led Foucault to speak, not of the ‘Truth’ of knowledge in the absolute sense – a Truth which remained so, whatever the period, setting, context – but of a discursive formation sustaining a regime of truth. Thus, it may or may not be true that single parenting inevitably leads to delinquency and crime. But if everyone believes it to be so, and punishes single parents accordingly, this will have real consequences for both parents and children and will become ‘true’ in terms of its real effects, even if in some absolute sense it has never been conclusively proven. (Hall, 1997, p. 49)

The concept of truth in the social imaginary is often equated with what is good. However as Stuart Hall illustrates in the above example, truth often enacts violence; truth can also be used to justify power.

Throughout the various discursive frameworks that I have employed for this research process, power is conceptualized in varying ways. In social and reproduction theory and critical pedagogy power is understood through notions of domination, oppression and hegemony. Critical pedagogy for example provides us with a concrete understanding of factory schooling and the banking concept of education:

In the banking concept of education, knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing. Projecting an absolute ignorance onto others, a characteristic of the ideology of oppression, negates education and knowledge as processes of inquiry. The teacher presents himself to his students as their necessary opposite; by considering their ignorance absolute, he justifies his own existence. The students, alienated like the slave in the Hegelian dialectic, accept their ignorance as justifying the teacher’s existence – but, unlike the slave, they never discover that they educate the teacher. (Freire, 1970, p. 72)
Through critical pedagogy we come to understand the way that the violence of oppression and its resultant inequality is perpetuated “from generation to generation of oppressors who become its heirs and are shaped in its climate.” (Freire, p. 58) It also illustrates the way that internalized oppression can manifest through self-deprecation and/or lateral/horizontal violence. (Freire, 1970, p. 62-63)

This is the concept of power that shaped my understanding throughout the years of my teaching. However, through reading works by Stuart Hall (1997), Michele Foucault (1996), James Joseph Scheurich (1994) and Kari Dehli (2008), another more challenging concept of power was introduced to me that highlighted parts of my experience I had not yet found the language to express. This is the idea that power is dispersed; something multi-directional that retains hierarchies and is structured in many sites and in many ways. Power is a strategy, not a possession. This conception of power does not allow for a distinction between those that are guilty and those that are innocent; there is no position of exteriority. Thinking of it this way prevents me from placing my interview subjects or myself on a pedestal of imagined advancement in relation to other educators because we have created spaces of alternative learning. We are all complicit in this notion of power because it is an energy that interlocks and is active existing within social relations and piggybacking on economic processes, knowledge relationships and sexual relations. It is not attached to an identity that is fixed thereby preventing me from pointing my finger at “the man” or “the oppressor” as I have been steadily doing since my undergraduate studies. This is not to say that there are not hierarchies and privilege and real effects that leave some people punished and some people rewarded. Power can come from the way that one is read; the way knowledge of one’s body is circulated and organized. However these things are not absolute because understandings of power are temporal. They are shaped by what we know now but not what we will know later.

Numerous scholars have argued that schooling as a general institution is consistently interested in processes of sorting, controlling and influencing. (Collins, 2009, p. 4, Kumashiro, 2000, p. 36, Noguera, 2003, p. 344) The three primary functions of schools according to Pedro Noguera are to sort, socialize and socially control children:
First, schools sort children based on various measures of their academic ability and place them on trajectories that influence the economic roles and occupations they will assume as adults...Second, schools play an important role in socializing children by teaching the values and norms that are regarded as central to civil society and the social order...Finally, schools operate as institutions of social control, providing an important custodial function with respect to the care and movement of children (Noguera, 2003, p. 344. Emphasis included in original text)

It is interesting to note that nowhere in this outline is there a named desire to nurture children of imagination and critical intellect who are empowered to recognize their capacity to be transformative agents of social change. In this context of schooling defined and driven by sorting, socializing and social control, the role of the teacher becomes incredibly limited with minimal opportunity to creatively engage the complex lives of the students in their classrooms. As a result of the emphasis on repetition, routines and outcome-driven corporate imperatives (Baszile, 2009, p. 7) many schools function primarily as a space to reinforce and reproduce the norms of society.

Similarly, Bryan S. Turner argues that society has specific tasks in relation to the body: “…reproduction, regulation, restraint and representation.” (Pillow, 2003, p. 151) Schools similarly have had the task, since their inception in Western capitalist society, of disciplining bodies as well as regulating minds to inform and control conduct, beliefs and the determination of what is worthy of being known. (Rousmaniere, et. al, 1997, p. 3) Pedro A. Noguera’s outline of the various functions of schooling does not specifically name the body but regulation, restraint, reproduction and representation of student bodies are inherent elements of sorting, socialization and social control. The way these bodies are marked by race, gender and other identifying subjectivities often determines how they are regulated, restrained, represented and reproduced within a school system where the primary functions of sorting, socializing and social control shape and inform an official school curriculum that “reinforces the superiority of dominant subjectivities and the inferiority of others” (Baszile, 2009, p.8) The function of schooling as articulated by Noguera can be seen as a micro-level extension of these larger tasks of society, both of which locate and position the body as a site for the inscription of power relations. Schools through these processes sort and organize bodies to maintain and reproduce the unequal
power dynamics of society while couched in a discourse of meritocracy and equal opportunity. (Rist, 2000)

These functions of schooling speak to a particular political anatomy or a mechanics of power that Foucault describes in his seminal text *Discipline and Punish*. He suggests that political anatomy utilizes disciplinary practices to produce docile bodies that operate with mandated and regulated notions of being: “Discipline increases the forces of the body (in economic terms of utility) and diminishes these same forces (in political terms of obedience).” (Foucault, 1975, p.138) The body therefore becomes the place where power is inscribed and realized. As a potential unit of economic utility, the student is invested in to represent and reproduce the norms of society while simultaneously divested of political power when facing the repressive powers of restraint and regulation that call for their obedience and compliance. The use of ranking as a form of social organization, the organization of space to support the consistent supervision of individuals, the organization of time as a positive economy of utility, maximum efficiency and productivity (Foucault, 1975, p.146-149) are all historically specific practices, often dubbed now as the hidden curriculum (Jackson, 1968) that instill docility and are normalized in schooling. Although students may leave school not remembering the significance of algebraic formulations, years of responding to bells, sitting in rows, understanding the teacher as authority, being organized through gradation, learning through categorization and being held under constant surveillance, they will leave them successfully versed in reproducing the hierarchical structures and docile populations deemed necessary for order and justice in society. It is this component that illustrates the success of schools in promoting “the self-regulation of adults and children and the cultural repertoires or discourses within which we come to see ourselves a certain kinds of persons.” (Rousmaniere et. al, 1997, p. 3)

With this in mind, this chapter moves through the various discursive frameworks that I believe best support me in the research process.

### 2.2 Social and Cultural Reproduction Theory
As James Baldwin noted: “…the whole process of education occurs within a social framework and is designed to perpetuate the aims of society.” (Baldwin, 2008, p. 17) This study utilizes social reproduction theory to examine the ways that schools participate in a form of power through the reproduction of inequalities and particular ideologies in society.

Reproduction theory can be traced to Karl Marx whose concepts have heavily grounded and informed radical socialist theories of schooling. (Giroux, 2001, p. 3) Reproduction theory challenges the liberal notion that schooling provides equal opportunity for social mobility to all and rather indicts the schooling system as a leading institution in “the reproduction of dominant ideology, its forms of knowledge, and the distribution of skills needed to reproduce the social division of labor.” (Giroux, 2001, p.3) Henry Giroux summarizes the work of other theorists such as Bowles and Gintis, Gramsci and Althusser to assert three major arenas where schools are considered reproductive within this theory:

First, schools provided different classes and social groups with the knowledge and skills they needed to occupy their respective places in a labor force stratified by class, race, and gender. Second, schools were seen as reproductive in the cultural sense, functioning in part to distribute and legitimize forms of knowledge, values, language and modes of style that constitute the dominant culture and its interests. Third, schools were viewed as part of a state apparatus that produced and legitimized the economic and ideological imperatives that underlie the state’s political power. (Giroux, 2001, p. 4)

The idea of agency and individual autonomy do not allow us to see that we are captured in a discourse of liberalism that blinds us from the ways that we knowingly and unknowingly contribute to the reproduction of certain systems, values and patterns in society. When considering the ways that particular understandings of justice become normalized by everyday practices in systems of schooling, social and reproduction theory is able to shed light on the various ways this is enacted.

However it must be clear that this theory has its limitations. Its emphasis on cycles and structures reproducing themselves is important but does not always leave room for the understanding that schools and classrooms are also being produced, reproduced,
challenged and resisted through constantly shifting social, political and economic changes. It is here that cultural reproduction theory can be helpful in addressing these gaps and limitations. As Henry Giroux notes:

…reproduction accounts of schooling have continually patterned themselves after structural-functionalist versions of Marxism which stress that history is made “behind the backs” of the members of society. The idea that people do make history, including its constraints has been neglected. Indeed, human subjects generally “disappear” amidst a theory that leaves no room for moments of self-creation, mediation and resistance…schools are often viewed as factories or prisons, teachers and students alike act merely as pawns and role-bearers constrained by the logic and social practices of the capitalist system. (Giroux, 2001, p. 4-5)

A Marxist analysis would simply locate the state and it’s institutions as an instrument of the dominant class. Although the state can be seen as a site for the interests of the ruling class, those interests are not homogenous. In fact, they are often competing. It is this division between ruling elites that in part creates openings and opportunities for people to influence and shift policy. Social and reproduction theorists ignore the ways that human conflict, struggle, resistance and challenge create shifts and fissures in structures that force systems to respond and rearrange. However cultural reproduction and cultural production theory has sought to address some of these concerns as is evidenced in the works of Stuart Hall (1993, 1997) and Paul Willis (2003). As Pedro A. Noguera so poignantly notes, if reproduction theorists were in the 1800’s writing about the structure of plantation slavery they would not have been able to explain the existence of Harriet Tubman. The structure and institution of slavery and the patterns, values and economic systems it reproduced would not have been able to explain the existence of an enslaved Black woman who was illiterate, physically disabled and yet escaped and freed hundreds of slaves through the Underground Railroad. (Noguera, 2014).

2.3 Critical Pedagogy and Critical Hip Hop Pedagogy

This belief in the importance of human agency and reflection can be found somewhat in the theory of critical pedagogy. At the heart of critical pedagogy is the attempt to dismantle the ways of knowing and being that help to reproduce inequalities and
oppression. Paulo Freire argues that this must be done through the simultaneous process of reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it: praxis. (Freire, 1970 p. 51) As noted in my earlier anxiety of being lost in the inaccessible world of endless theorizing and deconstruction, this research is an attempt at a praxis-oriented inquiry.

The insistence that the oppressed engage in reflection on their concrete situation is not a call to armchair revolution. On the contrary, reflection – true reflection – leads to action. On the other hand, when the situation calls for action, that action will constitute an authentic praxis only if its consequences become the object of critical reflection. (Freire, 1970, p. 66)

Although providing a layered analysis on the issues in education systems, critical pedagogy also posits potential solutions. It argues for a discontinuation of the banking system of learning and a shift toward problem-posing education, a methodology we consciously attempted to implement in Lost Lyrics and one that has affected my perspective of desirable classroom relations between teacher and students:

Through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teachers. The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with students, who in turn while being taught also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow…. Whereas banking education anesthetizes and inhibits creative power, problem-posing education involves a constant unveiling of reality. The former attempts to maintain the submersion of consciousness; the latter strives for the emergence of consciousness and critical intervention in reality. (Freire, 1970, p. 80-81)

Critical pedagogy emphasizes “the issue of coming to voice” (hooks, 1994 p. 185) and creating space for those who are often not authorized to speak. Encouraging democracy in the classroom where all are encouraged to invest and contribute also means opening the possibility for the unexpected and the unplanned. As bell hooks notes: “The unwillingness to approach teaching from a standpoint that includes awareness of race, sex, and class is often rooted in the fear that classrooms will be uncontrollable, that emotions and passions will not be contained.” (p. 39) Kevin Kumashiro calls this uncontrollable state an experience of “crisis.” He argues that:

If students are not experiencing crisis, they are likely not learning things that challenge the knowledge they have already learned that supports the status quo, which means that they likely are not learning to recognize and challenge the
oppression that plays out daily in their lives…Learning is not a comforting process that merely repeats or affirms what students have already learned. Learning is a disarming process that allows students to escape the uncritical complacent repetition of their prior knowledge and actions. Learning is a disorienting process that raises questions about what was already learned and has yet to be learned. (Kumashiro, 2000, p. 32)

This argument that learning is not a comfortable process aligns with the dangerous pedagogy inherent to including such a paradoxical, raw and unapologetic cultural form as Hip Hop in the classroom. A. A. Akom notes that:

CHHP differs from Hip Hop pedagogy because it simultaneously (1) foregrounds race and racism and their intersectionality with other forms of oppression; (2) challenges traditional paradigms, texts, and theories used to explain the experiences of students of colour; (3) centralizes experiential knowledge of students of colour; (4) emphasizes the commitment to social justice; and final, (5) encourages a transdisciplinary approach. (2009, p. 63)

Numerous interviewees discussed the importance of creating a safe space for the learning process to occur. However, there is a danger inherent to the encouragement of critical dialogue and uncomfortable questioning when one lives in a society where not all voices are listened to equally. This danger can transcend whatever illusions of safety have been created in the classroom, as was articulated by Hazel during the group interview when the conversation moved to the development of critical thinking in students. She poignantly noted:

Hazel: In a system these young people need to know their role and know how to talk to an authority figure. So if I’m teaching my young person to critically challenge and they get home and the police knock down the door and that young person is critically challenging the police, they may end up in handcuffs and in jail as opposed to if they sat down and shut up maybe that would not have happened. Which is an absolute unfortunate reality.

Critical pedagogy seems to be silent when addressing tangible realities such as these.

A. A. Akom names critical Hip Hop pedagogy (CHHP) as a space where Freire’s work on conscientizacao is operationalized and:

…transformative education for the poor and disempowered begins with the creation of pedagogic spaces where marginalized youth become aware of how their own experiences have been shaped by larger social institutions. Through a counter-
hegemonic curricula that focuses on youth culture and resistance, racial identity and social reproduction, and counter-narratives, students of color are able to provide alternative explanations of school inequality and simultaneously gain a critical perspective of the world. (Akom, 2009, p. 55)

Through this research I hoped to create a space where I interviewed and analyzed the work of educators who use CHHP but also engage it through my own process of research as an active participant in this scholarly movement. Through critical Hip Hop Pedagogy I am able to connect my work to critical race theory. Critical race theory is an important framework of analysis as it enables me to consider racism and all other oppressions as something that transcends the individual isolated acts made by bigoted people or people who make bigoted decisions. Rather the analysis is extended to consider these incidences as “larger, systemic, structural, and cultural, as deeply psychological and socially ingrained.” (Tuck et. al, p 82) Within this lens, things that have been normalized and made invisible can become visible. Whiteness is pulled from its invisible mantle and interrogated for its unearned privilege. Critical race theory forces me to consider social location and the multiplicity of identities that can be held by a single individual including that of myself and the interviewees of this study. A. A. Akom’s articulation of the principles of CHHP recognize these elements of critical race theory:

- It foregrounds race, racism, gender, and other axis of social difference in the design, data collection, and analysis
- It challenges the traditional paradigms, methods, and texts as a way to engage in a discourse on race that is informed by the actual conditions and experiences of people of color
- It is trans-disciplinary, drawing on Black/African Studies, Raza Studies, Ethnic Studies, and Women’s Studies to name a few.
- It seeks a balance among critical thinking, reflection, analysis, and action. (Akom, 2009, p. 56)
Chapter 3
Methodology

3.1 A Brief Background on the Methodological Journey

The inspiration for this research is personal. It is rooted in my experience of being an educator who attempts to be reflective and reflexive in her practice and processes. While working as an educator and Managing Director for Lost Lyrics, a non-profit organization that was consistently searching, applying and organizing for the next grant/fundraiser, there was little time for anything other than reacting to the situation at hand. Deciding to leave the front-line and return to the academy was an opportunity to breathe, to pause, to document and to critically question the methods within the madness. Although this research is inspired by and will call on my memories to situate and locate my perspective and understanding, I am wary of the ways that my experiences and the articulation of these experiences are tempered and mediated. Rather than placing my experiences on a pedestal of ultimate truth to be deciphered and deconstructed, this study recognizes that “experience is both temporal and storied” (Clandinin et. al, 1994, p. 415). In utilizing ethnographic data gathered through interviews with educators asked to recall their own experiences, I am cognizant of the ways that my information gathering has placed significant weight on the evidence of experience. Joan W. Scott warns about the dangers inherent to this method:

When experience is taken as the origin of knowledge, the vision of the individual subject (the person who had the experience or the historian who recounts it) becomes the bedrock of evidence of which explanation is built. Questions about the constructed nature of experience, about how subjects are constituted as different in the first place, about how one’s vision is structured – about language (or discourse) and history – are left aside. (Scott, 1991, p. 777)

This measured understanding of experience is a critical location of analysis for developing a working definition of reflexivity for this study. Reflexivity is defined as:
a) the process of critical self-reflection on one’s biases, theoretical predispositions, preferences”; b) an acknowledgement that “the inquirer is part of the setting, context, and social phenomenon he or she seeks to understand”; and c) a means for critically inspecting the entire research process. (Schwandt as quoted in Luttrell, 2010, p. 3)

With this definition in mind, I have viewed this research process as an ongoing practice in reflexivity of not only my experiences as an educator but also of my role as a researcher. Attempting to be aware and critical of the space I consciously and unconsciously take up, the lens that I use, the way my experiences shape my perspective and making sure to recognize the shifts in my location with each step in the process has made reflexivity an active journey.

3.2 Why Hip Hop Educators?

I decided to focus my research on teachers rather than students because I was interested in creating a space for educators to do what I had not been able to do while teaching; reflect. I was interested in hearing their perspectives on the various roles they occupied, understanding how they located these roles within the larger institution of schooling and concepts of justice, and tracing how their understanding informed the decisions that they made. One of the Toronto respondents articulated the role of the teacher as something that transcends the simple delivery of ministry defined curriculum expectations:

**Trevor:** The work of an educator or a teacher is not just what you do in terms of your small ‘c’ kind of curriculum…lessons in your classroom. It’s all about how you…advocate for particular students and groups within your building. So that for me is a constant project of social justice that is difficult work and courageous work because it’s going up in many ways against your colleagues and many ways against…whoever the administrators are in the building…and sometimes…you don’t have allies in that work.

Trevor’s articulation on the role of the teacher as advocate is a telling example of why I was specifically interested in interviewing educators who had based their practice in Critical Hip Hop Pedagogy (CHHP). As A. A. Akom notes when describing CHHP:

This framework is important precisely because it challenges the role that schools play in reproducing social inequality. Schools use “hidden” and “official” curricula
that promotes hegemony of the dominant class and embrace pedagogies that devalue
the voices and backgrounds of urban and suburban students of colour…CHHP
challenges these assumptions by suggesting that transformative education for the
poor and disempowered begins with the creation of pedagogic spaces where
marginalized youth are enabled to gain a consciousness of how their own
experiences have been shaped by larger social institutions. (2009, p. 63)

I wanted to explore the experiences, perspectives and stories of educators who are risk-
takers; educators who have decided to take the courageous step of going against the
grain. The rebellious nature of Hip Hop was something that intrigued me when I
discovered its pervasiveness in the practice and strategies of the teachers that I
interviewed. When asked how she navigated through the institutional policies of the
school and the autonomous space she attempts to create in her classroom as a teacher
with differing philosophies, Kathy, an educator from Toronto responded:

**Kathy:** I lie. I lie and I don’t follow the rules. I break them all the time. I
have conversations with kids and parents that sometimes I never report back
to the administration about…I do things not always by the book and that’s
how I do it. Cause if I did everything by the book I wouldn’t be true to myself
or even true to what kind of human being I am never mind true to my
philosophical ideas. And, for me in terms of the dishonesty and stuff, that
usually has to do with protecting my students. That’s usually in issues around
protecting my students or dealing with issues around conflict resolution
where I know that the school would automatically suspend the two youth
involved but I know that we can sit down and have a conversation and
everything will be ok.

As I proceeded through the interview process, I realized that these educators, who had
chosen to engage Hip Hop education as critical pedagogy, were often profiled and
targeted in similar (although not as dangerous) ways as the students they worked with.
Interpolating this marking of their pedagogy and position as resistant and different from
that of their colleagues, many of the interviewees viewed this distinction as a badge of
honor, a measure of authenticity that filtered into their responses to my questions.

Acknowledging the potentially risky work of these teachers and the discomfort it
produced in their colleagues means recognizing the power implicit in their role (a distinct
form of power than that exercised by and available for the students that they teach). This
power is impacted and informed by the role they play (or refuse to play) in the processes of regulation, reproduction and control that can be found within the practice of schooling in North America. I wanted to explore their role in the production of producing the normative model of the moment: the disciplined, productive citizen. (Scheurich, 1994, p. 307) Were these educators passive participants in this project? Subconscious agents unaware of what they were contributing to? Or were they conscious resisters, strategically engaged in various protests against the systems they were employed by?

I was interested in providing educators with an opportunity for their perspectives to be centered in a research field that often locates lazy teachers and bad students as the primary cause for failing students and/or schools. (Noguera, 2013) I was curious about what constituted a “good teacher” to these Hip Hop based educators and particularly how this goodness is constructed in moments of conflict and crisis within the classroom. I was interested in the work that these educators have embarked upon to consciously construct spaces that attempt to resist the dangerous systemic patterns of hierarchy and marginalization often reproduced by educational institutions. Rather than merely celebrating and documenting their efforts I wanted to interrogate some of the challenges faced by the educators who alongside their students are the architects of particular alternative learning spaces. These motivations informed my methodological choices.

I specifically chose educators interested in Hip Hop Based Education (HHBE) because I am interested in contributing to a growing scholarly movement that is critically considering the potential of HHBE in relation to questions of power, culture, identity and policy. (Hill, et. al, 2013 p. 1-2) Marc Lamont Hill and Emery Petchauer note that the early period of Hip Hop Based Education scholarship was primarily focused on legitimizing it’s pedagogic potential. In the midst of a wide-spread and highly publicized public debate on the negative effects of “gangster rap,” research on Hip Hop Based Education focused on analyzing the larger historical context of Hip Hop culture and demonstrating the educational potential within rap lyrics. (Hill, et. al, 2013, p.1-2) Decoteau J. Irby and H. Bernard Hall illustrated in their demographic study of educators that the time has come for scholarly research to “move beyond concerns about legitimating HHBE.” (Irby, et. al, 2011, p.113) Numerous studies have been conducted
about the importance and effectiveness of Hip Hop Based Education in the classroom. I acknowledge that vital work but also aim to move beyond it. It is important that we can have critical and necessary conversations that transcend the need to validate the existence of these spaces by simplistically celebrating their successes and rather enter into the difficult moments that challenge and disrupt the goals and desires of the classroom. I believe that this critical work is as a way of tangibly supporting these innovators. Rather than simply contributing to the already well populated arena of case studies exploring the experiences of teacher-researchers in HHBE, I hope that my work can raise new theoretical questions around the possibilities of Hip Hop culture’s “sensibilities and worldviews” as pedagogy (Hill, et. al, 2013, p.9) and provide support to educators interested in challenging the dynamics and practices of their classrooms and schools.

The field of Hip Hop Education has yet to be formally certified and professionalized in Toronto or New York as of this study, and as a result the individuals invited to participate were asked to self-identify as Hip Hop Based Educators. This request for self-identification is an important element that did not allow me to impose my own definition of what a Hip Hop Educator should be on to the invited participants. However, I did want to make sure that this self-identification had also received some validation as Hip Hop is a cultural form that has often been appropriated and co-opted by those not genuinely interested in it’s capacity for creativity, innovation and critical intervention. As in any movement, there are levels to the field of Hip Hop Education. The more popular and easy-to-sell methods, “the use of rap music as a gimmick or hook to engage students in the standard curriculum” (Low, 2011, p. 147) often ignore the criticality inherent to Hip Hop and merely appropriate the elements as tools that can be inserted into the curriculum without challenging or reimagining the overall discourse, classroom or curriculum in any significant way. (Au, 2005, p. 211-212) As Dr. Travis Gosa noted at the November 10th, 2013 panel “How are institutions of higher education contributing and shaping the field of Hip Hop Education?” there has emerged a predatory arm within the Hip Hop Education movement where ciphers and lyrics are used to teach the myth of Christopher Columbus and other oppressive lies of colonial education.
The invited participants to this research study are all recognized as Hip Hop educators who utilize various forms of Critical Hip Hop Pedagogy by their peers through their membership and association with various Hip Hop Education projects and bodies in their respective cities. The Hip Hop educators in New York City are loosely connected via their association with the Hip Hop Education Centre (formerly based at New York University) and the Toronto participants are connected through their participation/connection to the creation of the 2014 published book *Rhymes to Re-Education: A Hip Hop Curriculum Resource Guide* which was sponsored in part by the Toronto District School Board and the Ontario Ministry of Education.

The term educator is also used in a broad sense for the purposes of this study. It does not limit this position to those who have been certified by state/private institutions and are currently employed in the public/private school system. According to a U.S. census study of Hip Hop Educators released in 2011, 37% of Hip Hop Education programs and courses take place in settings outside of the school including juvenile correctional facilities, town halls, religious congregations and community centers. (Diaz, et. al, 2011) Hip Hop culture emerged and is sustained outside of formal institutions and in a similar fashion the HHBE Movement received its first commendation, affirmation and recognition outside of formal schooling structures. (Irby et. al, 2011, p. 97) Especially as a result of my own personal experience as an educator who purposefully has not been certified yet works in a variety of arenas, it was important for me to include educators who teach outside of the school system. As Lois Weis and Michelle Fine note:

…education does not take place just in schools…It occurs at dinnertime, in front of the television set, on street corners, in religious institutions, in family planning clinics, and in lesbian and gay community groups…poor and working-class youth sometimes are fortunate enough to find the strength and fortitude to continue educating themselves and one another in spaces they craft and tenaciously hold on to, often against great odds…These are spaces of deep, sustained community-based educative work – in many cases, outside the bounds of formal schooling. (Weis, et. al, p. 122-123)
The educators selected for this study are also varied across race, gender and social class but all share the common perspective of teaching in urban communities that primarily engage racialized students from poor and working-class neighborhoods. Please see Appendix A for a systematic profile breakdown of the interviewees.

3.3 Why the Classroom?

I have chosen the classroom as my primary site of analysis because it remains one of the few locations in our society dedicated to intentional and organized learning. It is a point of convergence between a variety of actors and as such is a space engineered through gender, through race, through class, through sexuality and through ability. It is a meeting point and with that meeting comes possibility, so as such I view the classroom as a sacred space that has the capacity to take people on a journey. It is also a space where the lines between witnessing and participating become blurred. Management, regulation and punishment as well as affirmation, celebration and resistance are processes that become active in the exchanges, interactions and dynamics between unequal social actors within the classroom. Moving away from common conceptions of classrooms as locations where educators merely impart information that is absorbed and regurgitated by students, I am interested in examining the potential of the classroom to be a site of creativity and challenge while acknowledging it as an inherently political space:

Rather than seeing classrooms as removed from the seat of power, as sites where decisions that are made elsewhere simply flow through them or as sites where everyone merely follows the rules, classrooms are deeply implicated in reproducing the structural domain of power. Practicing resistance in the structural domain requires changing classroom practices, a process that, if we can see it differently, constitutes grassroots political practice. From this perspective, the classroom is already a political space, whether the teacher chooses to recognize this reality or not. (Collins, 2009, p. 96)

Examining the classroom in this way is not to infuse it with a mythical proportion of grassroots front-line activism that ignores the larger system of schooling it is attached and accountable to. I recognize that the decisions and actions of teachers and students are
influenced by school policies that mediate and constrain the options available to them. (Besley, 2005, p. 77) Rather, it is to recognize the potential that resides within this space and to mine that potential through the experiences of educators who envisage their role and responsibility as divergent from the form and function of the schooling system that supplies their wage.

Although I have been speaking about classrooms in the context of schools, it is important to remember that this study also examines the potential of classrooms that exist outside of formal school settings or occur within the school but do not hold the power of accreditation (i.e. within school programming, after school programs, etc.) I have defined the classroom as a space that can transcend the public schooling system because I am interested in the potential of these spaces to be what Lois Weis and Michelle Fine call, counterpublics, “spaces where adults and youth can challenge the very exclusionary practices currently existing in public institutions – practices that inscribe inequalities by social class, race, gender and sexuality.” (Weis, et. al, p. 124) With that said, this research will resist the call to romanticize these arenas and remain aware of the potential for “alternative spaces” to replicate discourses of power through the unchallenged replication of ideas such as hierarchy in governance, progress and competition.

3.4 Why a Narrative Analysis Study?

Early on, I knew that I would be engaging in a qualitative study. In wanting to create a thesis that appreciated the importance of “context and process” (Luttrell, 2010, p. 2) it was clear that qualitative research would be the most effective method. This human voice needed to extend beyond my own and beyond those that had already been legitimized through publication to have space. While in the midst of my research I became frustrated with the limited perspective provided when I utilized only my own personal memories and reflections as my primary source of data. Also, as someone contributing to the burgeoning field of Hip Hop Based Education and writing on a subject that has not yet been adequately considered by scholars in the field, I knew it was imperative that I include additional subjects who can provide varying perspectives in my research. Deciding to focus my research on the practices and perspectives of educators who work
with communities and populations that are often alienated, silenced and mined by scholarly institutions, it became important that my process create space for human voices. In conjunction with my personal reflection, my methodology includes one-on-one and group interviews with other human subjects, a process that can be useful when cross-examining and triangulating my experiential data to ensure thorough attempts at validity. As Wendy Luttrell notes: “Qualitative research insists upon a face-to-face, heart-felt encounter between knowing subjects, a recognition that each of us is unique in our efforts to make sense of ourselves and the world around us.” (Luttrell, 2010, p.1)

3.5 A Brief Description of the Methodology

When considering how to move forward with this work, I became overwhelmed by the multitude of methodologies within the field of educational research. Selecting a single investigative process seemed a daunting if not impossible task. The realization that some scholars actually encourage the use of multiple data sources and investigative methodologies was a liberating one that enabled me to see this work as not something to be slotted into a singular category of process but rather something that, similarly to Hip Hop culture, required the mixing and meshing of various forms and ways of understanding and discovering knowledge. As a result, this study is a practice in “crystallization” (Richardson, 2000, p.927), an engagement with multiple forms of data and research production. Similarly to Hip Hop culture’s practices of sampling and remixing, this methodology borrows from several spaces in an attempt to create a piece of work that is contributing fresh and useful insight to the field. My data sources are my own memories and experiences, transcripts from interviews, writing by other Hip Hop educators, field notes from group interviews, notes from conferences and panels I have attended and various texts that span scholastic fields and communicative mediums (i.e. journal, newspaper and magazine articles, blogs, policy reports, books, etc.)

3.6 Personal Reflection as Creative Analytic Practice

In part this research will be a creative analytic practice (Richardson, 2000) in personal reflection (Jones, 2005, p.765). As both an educator and a scholar, it is important for me
to recognize the wealth and inherent connection between these two worlds of experience and theory while also challenging the gendered binary that is often created between the masculine field of educational research and the feminine terrain of teaching. (Luttrell, 2010, p. 2). Viewing myself as not only researcher but also narrator as I develop my own interpretations, I consider how my lens of not only analytical theory but also how my own experiences, enable, shape and constrain my perspective. I aspire to “purposeful and tension-filled ‘self-investigation’ of [my] role in a context, a situation or a social world.” (Jones, 2005, p.767). As Stacy Holman Jones states, it is important to ask “How much does a scholar know, how does she know it, and what can she do with this knowledge in the world?” (Jones, 2005, p. 767)

3.7 The Methodological Dream and its Reality

Initially, my goal was to employ a slight adaptation of the Critical Incident in Practice Protocol as developed by Dr. Wendy Luttrell (Luttrell, n.d. [webpage]) Critical incidents in practice work with the goal of identifying and developing a written narrative on a moment of conflict, violence or disruption in the classroom. It was my hope to conduct two group interviews with 3 Hip Hop Based Educators in New York and 3 in Toronto. These six educators were to choose a critical incident that occurred in their teaching where they had to use discipline in the classroom. Rather than asking educators to provide a general description of how conflicts are addressed in the classroom, I was going to ask them to narrow in on specific and particular instances. The identification of an incident or situation would enable us to move from a perspective of things just happening and rather critically consider the historical and temporal moment that has been selected.

In an attempt to not limit the possibilities of their responses, my plan was to not provide a definition of the terms discipline, conflict, disruption, violence or punishment. In doing this I was cognizant that my framing of this narrative as an incident and the follow-up questions that I asked would define the starting and stopping points of these accounts. Once the experience was selected, they would be asked to document this account in writing. They would then orally share their narrative with the group. As the participants
listened to each narrative, they would be asked to choose a moment(s) in each story where they had a question and would like to know more – about the context, the background, the thoughts or the feelings of the people involved. These questions would facilitate critical dialogue among Hip Hop Educators on each of the critical incidents they share. This dialogue was meant to be a crucial component in this process as it would move the experience away from participants simply being producers of data, to creating opportunities for them to be human subjects engaged in active and critical thinking in research about their lives. (Luttrell, 2010 p. 4)

My first group interview in Toronto illustrated that this plan had some flaws when put into practice. The 3 educators who arrived for the interview out of the seven that were invited (I purposefully invited seven educators assuming that there would be some cancellations), all knew each other personally and had worked together on numerous occasions with two of the educators currently teaching at the same school. This familiarity created a comfortable and informal atmosphere that facilitated a space of sharing where numerous stories were recounted. There was a pleasure in observing the ways that individuality was challenged by the breaking of silence between these educators reminding each other of various scenarios; a collective sharing of experience emerged. However it prevented any real questioning or challenge between them as their relationships took precedence from the learning opportunity provided; a clear tone of loyalty set unspoken parameters. As a result when each educator recounted the narrative that they had written as a pre-assignment to the interview, no one responded with any questions or follow-up other than affirming that the educator had done the right thing. Fortunately I was able to utilize a number of interview questions that I had prepared to guide my thoughts and I relied on these to open the session up and create room for dialogue to occur. The group loyalty displayed during the sharing of narratives continued into the interview, with teachers agreeing and building off of each other’s statements in ways that may not have occurred in one-on-one interviews.

There were notable risks in deciding to make this process a collective and shared group interview rather than the anonymous individual online processes as originally conceptualized by Dr. Wendy Luttrell. The call to performance that occurs in collective
sharing spaces creates interesting and potentially dangerous dynamics in the process of reflection and analysis:

These are risky performances for all involved, and not only because they testify to the spaces of failure, silence, and loss. They are risky because in the rush to identification, empathy and our desire for an “authentic” experience, audiences and performers can give and receive testimony in ways that move too quickly from a connected yet distinctive “you” and “me” to an unquestioned and violent “we.” This collapsing of me into you and you into me can work to shut down engagement and responsibility.” (Jones, 2005, p.772).

Witnessing the dynamics within the group interview, I observed participants nodding in agreement to statements made by colleagues that directly contradicted things they had stated earlier. The desire to agree and the comfort that comes with like-mindedness quickly became tainted by the temporary release of principles in return for camaraderie. However, in spite of this, it is interesting to note that the performance inherent to the group interview is also a space of possibility, a reminder of the situated self:

Performativity points to the impossibility of separating our life stories from the social, cultural and political contexts in which they are created and the ways in which performance as a site of dialogue and negotiation is itself a contested space.” (Jones, 2005, p.774)

Due to scheduling difficulties I was unable to coordinate a group interview in New York but following my experience in Toronto I marked this as a blessing in disguise and decided to conduct the rest of my research as one-on-one interviews utilizing the same questions that I had prepared for the original Toronto group interview. I conducted Skype interviews with two Hip Hop Educators in New York, one Skype interview with an educator in Toronto, one telephone interview with an educator in Toronto and one in-person interview with an educator in Toronto. Each of the interviewees were asked to recount a personal narrative and in many instances through their answers to interview questions, they shared various other stories and experiences of dealing with conflict in the classroom.
It was important for me to choose a methodology that provided educators with the space to determine what information they share and how they share it. I wanted to create a space where participants are not provided with optional statements that they have to select best describes their experience and slot themselves into already defined categories of being, but rather are given room to allow them to use their own words in order to make sense of their experiences. Their narratives are important accounts to be studied, but they also represent stories that these participants will have determined to be worthy and/or suitable for being shared and discussed. Narrative as a discourse provides the opportunity to consider how one understands their own and others’ actions, retrospectively consider and connect events and consequences and organize experiences into meaningful wholes. (Chase, 2010). I recognize of course that these stories are constrained and shaped by historical, social and cultural circumstance and that even the act of sharing is produced as a performance specific to this setting (Chase, 2010). As a “short topical story about a particular event and specific characters” (Chase, 2010, p. 209) the incidents shared by educators are considered as written/spoken narratives. Jean D. Clandinin and Michael F. Connelly assert “when persons note something of their experience, either to themselves or to others, they do so not by the mere recording of experience over time, but in storied form.” (Clandinin et. al, 1994, p. 415)

It was important for me to do my interviews in the language of the community that I was interviewing. I also consciously decided to select interviewees who are rarely held up as community representatives yet continue to persistently do the work. I was reminded by one of my professors to be cognizant of community representatives who are considered without due process to be holders of knowledge and are easily made into celebrities. (Salah, 2012)

The interview sessions were audio recorded and transcribed by myself. Field notes were taken following each interview, documenting my own participant-observations.

### 3.8 Data Analysis
After transcribing all of the interviews, I read over the transcripts and pulled out words that stood out and created a chart detailing how many times these words were used by the interviewees. Upon my second reading of the transcripts I identified several recurring themes, images and metaphors that emerged in the interviews and detailed how often these themes were repeated. On my third reading, I created a chart listing each of the stories of a classroom incident recounted by the interviewees and identified the role of the teacher, the role of the student and the role of the school administration in the story. During each of these readings I also created notes about thoughts that would come up regarding the data and it’s connection to my research questions and the literature that I have read. Upon completing these charts I then returned to my research questions and began to answer them based on the themes and common language that had emerged as well as the absences and silences that I observed. From there I was able to find the major arenas that I wanted to delve more deeply into. I then returned to my notes on the literature and connected these arenas to the work of the scholars that I had read.

My listening was guided by various strategies, including the use of self-evaluative language and meta-statements (Luttrell, 2010). I also attempted to listen to what was missing, the silences in stories:

Silences pose significant meanings and telling data in any research that deals with moral choices, ethical dilemmas, and just social policies. Silence signifies absence and sometimes reflects a lack of awareness or inability to express thoughts and feelings. However, silence speaks to power arrangements. It can also mean attempts to control information, to avoid redirecting actions, and, at times, to impart tacit messages. The “right” to speak may mirror hierarchies of power: Only those who have power dare to speak. (Charmaz, 2005, p. 527)

A critical part of my analysis has been to consider how these educators locate their individual stories in a larger context of historical understanding. As Lois Weis and Michelle Fine note,

…when we engage ethnographically, speak to people, collect survey data, or conduct a focus group, it is most unusual for individuals to articulate the relations between and among their own ‘personal lives’ and the historic, economic and racial relations
within which they exist. History appears as a ‘foreign force’…That is indeed the insidious victory of neoliberal ideology; people speak as if they are self-consciously immune and independent, disconnected, and insulated from history, the state, the economic context, and ‘others.’ (Weis, et. al, p. xvii-xviii)

In the context of a study on education, this conception of the individual as self-motivated and self-determining can become particularly dangerous when it filters into educators’ assessments of students and their behavior. More on this will be discussed further in the study. In thinking about my relationship to this data and how I would analyze and move through it, I recognized that my listening/reading of transcripts was guided by my interest in social justice based education research. As Kathy Charmaz articulately notes:

An interest in social justice means attentiveness to ideas and actions concerning fairness, equity, equality, democratic process, status, hierarchy, and individual and collective rights and obligations. It signifies thinking about being human and about creating good societies and a better world. It prompts reassessment of our role as national and world citizens. It means exploring tensions between complicity and consciousness, choice and constraint, indifference and compassion, inclusion and exclusion, poverty and privilege, and barriers and opportunities. It also means taking a critical stance toward actions, organizations and social institutions. Social justice studies requires looking at both realities and ideals. Thus contested meanings of “should” and “oughts” come into play. (Charmaz, 2005, p. 510)

However in the midst of this, I questioned what any of these qualifiers that crept into my listening meant. What does it mean to be fair, to be democratic to create a good society? How did I come to this understanding? Who determines what is the ideal and how do they come to this definition? It is here that I realized how persistent I had to be in critically disrupting my own listening and questioning myself on my assessments and analysis.

Considering the narratives shared by participants as active creations shaped by particular actions I am able to emphasize and highlight the voice(s) of the narrator and move away from valuative assessments of what is “true” and what is “false” about Hip Hop educators as an imagined cohesive population, to an exploration into “the versions of self, reality,
and experience that the storyteller produces through the telling.” (Chase, 2010, 214) As such there is a balance that I must strike as a researcher attempting to gather an understanding of and make claims to the practices of these educators but also and always reflexively considering the ethnographic exchange that is taking place between myself and the participants of the study. (Luttrell, 2010, p. 262)

3.9 Limits of Methodology

I recognize that due to the small number of interviewees my study is incredibly limited and cannot be seen as an accurate reflection on the range of strategies used by Hip Hop Educators to address conflict in the classroom. I see it more as a snapshot and also an introduction to a larger conversation that I hope will be continued beyond this study. I am also wary that educators (like all human subjects) have biases and may not be a reliable source for how effectual they actually are. Hence why this study is not a focus on measuring impact but rather an investigation of various experiences and an identification of the patterns that emerge from this brief survey.

I also recognize that in focusing on educators who are located in urban classrooms and by being myself a “teacher-researcher” that I am replicating the pattern of biased HHBE scholarship discussed by Decoteau J. Irby and H. Bernard Hall in their chapter “Fresh Faces, New Places: Moving Beyond Teacher-Researcher Perspectives in Hip Hop Based Education Research.” For me, the urban arena is urgent for a variety of reasons including the fact that it is where I have always lived. Pedro Noguera notes that the urban has a variety of distinguishing features that separate it from nonurban spaces:

In fact, along with poverty, racial segregation, and crime in general, violence is one of the features that distinguishes the urban from the nonurban…The fear of violence serves as justification for the heavy police presence in many American cities. It also operates as an invisible social boundary that separates areas regarded as “safe” for business and middle-class residents, from areas where the poor are confined and that unofficially have been designated “no-man’s lands.” (Noguera, 2003, p. 103)
This feature of violence, whether an actual reality or not, is part of what makes a study on justice feel as though it necessarily should take place in an urban context. I do realize that there is a danger that this study can easily be classified as one of the many narrow scholarly contributions that “situate HHBE almost exclusively in the urban classroom context, commonly understood as educational spaces that cater to ‘at-risk’ youth.” (Irby, et. al, 2011, p. 96) In doing so, I make invisible “the diversity of places, teachers, student populations, pedagogies and outcomes that may be associated with HHBE.” (Irby, et. al, 2011, p. 96)

The decision to limit the scope of this study to the classroom means that there are many other space of analyses that have been left unexamined. Jacqui Alexander notes that when considering a project that is “teaching for justice” one must include a critical analysis of the state and it’s practices. (Alexander, 2005, p. 114) Beyond a brief mention in my first chapter this study does not extensively examine how political agendas are influenced by economic trends that then filter into economic policy. My research does not deeply engage the question of how school’s and communities interact and how a school locates itself within the neighborhood and what this means to teachers’ relationships with that community when moments of conflict and disruption occur in the classroom. This thesis also does not go into the specificities of Special Needs and ESL students and the particularities of their experiences in the classroom. In limiting my analysis, I have not created adequate space to examine ways that society further supports the reproduction of inequality through the inequity in funding to schools and how the economic backgrounds of students determines their academic outcomes. Although I attempt to touch on this, I know that it is an arena for more in depth analysis and is a ripe location for future research.

In the midst of all of these limits and gaps in my research, I also want to call attention to the fact that these absences are necessary and crucial spaces that acknowledge that this research is partial and continuing. It is not complete and whole. As Jacqui Alexander importantly states:

There is something quite profound about not knowing, claiming not to know, or not gaining access to knowledge that enables us to know that we are not the sole
(re)producers of our lives. But we would have to apprehend the loss that comes from not knowing and feel its absence in an immediate and palpable way in order to remake ourselves enough, so that our analyses might change. We have to learn how to intuit the consequences of not knowing, to experience their effects in order to reverse some of the deeply embedded deposits on which an imperial psyche rests…(2005, p. 109-110)
Chapter 4
Data Analysis

One of the key components to my research question was considering how Hip Hop informed the pedagogical and behavioral strategies utilized by the educators in this study. Each of them brought up the way that Hip Hop culture shaped not only the content of their lessons but also how they understood their roles as educators and the way this knowledge impacted the decisions they made during moments of disruption, conflict, disorder or violence in the classroom.

As practitioners and/or fans of the culture, they discussed the ways that this life-long love and participation in Hip Hop created a particular way of knowing and paradigmatic analysis that shaped their understanding of the classroom and the relationship to the students they engaged within it.

This chapter is organized under headings that highlight the major themes that emerged through these interviews. Each theme illustrates a particular layer that informs the paradigm these educators work within, one that is rooted deeply in a critical Hip Hop pedagogy. A brief description of each educator, the institution/organization they work in, their connection to Hip Hop and my relationship to them is listed in Appendix A.

4.1 Hip Hop Education as Risk and Rebellion

Hip Hop’s educational potential was first realized in the streets and neighborhoods where it originated: “Hip Hop was a source of informal education.” (Irby, et. al, 2011, p. 97) As the CNN for Black people Hip Hop culture, and particularly rap music, was not only a mouthpiece to the outside world but also a news source for the sharing of information between communities. It provided strategies for survival, debate and commentary on various issues and of course the space for artistic flexing of various skills and talents that

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3 Chuck D once famously remarked that “Rap music is the CNN for Black people.” (Chang, 2004)
were created and developed through the original four elements of deejaying, graffiti, rap and breakdancing.

Much of the educational research around Hip Hop Education has been an attempt to legitimize its existence and prove its worthiness in schools. This battle is still ongoing for many of the teachers who were interviewed for this study as they attempt(ed) to gather the respect, support and resources necessary to provide this pedagogy within their schools and communities. Chris, a teacher in New York describes the challenge in having Hip Hop Educational pedagogy respected as a serious endeavor rather than an extracurricular program:

**Chris:** I think making that jump to institutionalizing it is hard because it’s never been done before and because of the fact that there’s a lack of value placed on Hip Hop culture in general so it’s hard to then like bring that into school spaces. So I’d say that the issue comes from like it’s really hard to get space to do this stuff full time and to institutionalize it a lot of the time it’s like “Oh, why don’t you use a lunch period?”…or it’s like “Why don’t you do it after school?”…Why? Why can’t I just do it in the middle of the day? And I think that that just comes from again that lack of value…”

The colleagues at Chris’ school do not directly discount the value or merit of Hip Hop education by naming their misgivings but rather through their suggestions ensure its status as an appendage to the core activities of the classroom. A. A. Akom argues that the skepticism and doubt surrounding Hip Hop based education can operate as a mask for a larger fear held by many of its possibility as a “viable discursive space full of liberatory potential.” (2009, p. 54) Kathy, a teacher in Toronto, poignantly located this somewhat abstracted anxiety that is implicit in the excuses given by the administration of her school as something that is informed by racial privilege and fear:

**Kathy:** I think because Hip Hop pedagogy lends itself to these very intellectual and critical conversations, there’s a lot people who are afraid of that. Even if they can’t articulate their fear…So they’ll say, oh well, you know it costs money to run this course or it costs money to bring in these people, and it’s like you know we don’t have money...So we have to think of things outside of the box to service them and people don’t like that. People don’t like going outside the box, particularly if the youth you are trying to service ain’t their grandbabies. So the other piece that I find in the backlash against Hip Hop education, probably has more to do with the fact that you have a large group of white people who don’t know how to process the fact that Hip Hop education potentially could help a whole lot of not white
people…I don’t think that any person that I’m referring to that I’ve had this kind of experience with would articulate by saying, well you ain’t helping my grandbabies so I don’t want to give that money, but to me…that’s what it’s about…This is gonna get a whole bunch of not-white kids excited about school? And excited about being educated? And thinking critically? And like, going to post-secondary? And the reality is they don’t want that.

Kathy asserts that the resistance faced by Hip Hop Educators sheds light on concerns that extend beyond what is verbally expressed by the administrators of their schools. Economics are strategically leveraged to divert conversations from an unstated fear that this alternative learning space may shift and disrupt the social order in ways that are uncomfortable and unsettling for these educators. Bringing Hip Hop culture into schools and identifying it as a site of curriculum and learning is to “legitimize otherwise illegitimate forms of knowledge” (Ibrahim, 1999, p. 366), specifically knowledge that comes from and speaks directly to urban-dwelling Black youth. Interestingly, Kathy distinguishes herself from these “white people” but speaks with the authority of one who has the inside scoop. This distinction is a pattern that emerged throughout the interviews, particularly from those educators who worked as teachers inside of schools. Many recognized themselves as entities connected to but distinct from the institutions that employed them.

One element Kathy did not discuss is the potential danger if the opposite occurred and the administration put its stamp of approval on the use of critical Hip Hop pedagogy. Although this is what many if not most Hip Hop educators are working toward, there is a tension inherent to the moment an institution approves something that was made by the streets. One of the first and most obvious tensions in this instance is the fact that educational institutions in New York and Toronto employ a primarily white and middle class teaching force. This means that with institutional approval and system wide acceptance and integration, these individuals would theoretically be the primary bearers of the culture to the classroom. Mary Stone Hanley discusses the potential problems that arise when a largely white teaching force does become interested in Hip Hop Based Education:

> Engaging mostly white teachers with African American hip hop artists requires a reflective process of questioning their assumptions in general and also their
preconceptions about rap music, about the children and youth they teach, and particularly about the Black male as a creative intellectual. (2007, p. 38)

Although Kathy speaks openly and freely about the assumptions of her colleagues and administration, she is notably silent on the space assumptions may play in her personal pedagogy. Kathy’s willingness to speak about racial dynamics as an abstract guiding concern and silence on it’s particular presence in her own classrooms indicates a reluctance to deal with uncomfortability and the reality of power dynamics that may benefit and privilege her. I recognize how my presence as a known Black feminist scholar, educator and artist may have precipitated this self-censorship.

Although it is clear that there are many White teachers who are highly successful in working with students of color, conversations about race remain difficult and frequently go unspoken. It is essential to acknowledge the role that race plays in the strategies teachers use to impact the lives and learning of their students and to openly address any conflicts or discomforts teachers experience. (Luttrell, et. al, 2006, p. 151)

Kathy’s undeniable love and knowledge of Hip Hop culture, her consistent advocacy for its inclusion within her school and her relative privilege as a white female educator are all positions that exist simultaneously, shifting and informing the decisions that she makes, the stories that she tells and the ways that I read and understood her during our interview. These layers and seeming contradictions are also reflected in Hip Hop culture. Hip Hop culture is layered, complex, contradictory and evolving. Constantly shifting, sampling, remixing, responding and innovating, like any other cultural force it can be defined less by it’s products and elements and more through the meaning that it gives to the people and things that engage it.

Culture…is not so much a set of things – novels and paintings or TV programmes and comics – as a process, a set of practices. Primarily, culture is concerned with the production and the exchange of meanings – the ‘giving and taking of meaning’ – between members of a society or group. (Hall, p. 2)

The “dangerous” potential of Hip Hop based education comes from its fearless capacity to engage particular meanings within stories that have been systematically silenced, ignored, marginalized and/or sanitized: “Poverty, disorder, and ghetto culture are central to analyses of Hip Hop meaning, thanks to the symbolic importance of the ghetto as an element of Hip Hop authenticity and the historical importance of neglected urban space as the birthplace of Hip Hop culture.” (Jeffries, 2011, p. 28) Since its inception, Hip Hop
has consistently given raw, unapologetic and graphic meaning to the notion of the American dream. These new but not always transgressive or transformative meanings have been voraciously consumed by a public that previously reveled in their ignorance of what life is like for poor people of color in the urban city. In recent decades mainstream Hip Hop culture has become obsessed with defining the meaning of success for many of these individuals who although coming from impoverished beginnings are still immersed and invested in an individualistic and capitalist perspective. The nihilistic rage and frustration that has been expressed in large part through rap music and particular dance forms such as crump, is a direct challenge to the metanarrative of meritocracy and equal opportunity that dominates mainstream schooling. Hip Hop’s exposure throws these well-constructed myths that legitimize the education system into disarray. Even the violent and ugly elements glorified in rap music and Hip Hop film, create opportunity for difficult yet urgent dialogue to occur: “An art that contests the dominant culture of racism through an Afrocentric form but represents the black experience with drugs, violence and misogyny is replete with opportunities for critical literacy.” (Hanley, 2007, p. 40)

As fans and practitioners of the culture, the educators interviewed for this study had close connections to not only to the cultural products of Hip Hop but also to an abstract sense of Hip Hop logic and meaning that grounded some of their fundamental principles around teaching. The idea of Hip Hop culture providing a particular way of perceiving, knowing and understanding the world was invoked by several of the interviewees. They named, in various ways, a specific Hip Hop worldview that shaped their capacity to recognize and evaluate various situations as well as make decisions during critical moments in the classroom. Toronto based educator Trevor is also a Hip Hop practitioner. Working with middle-school students in the city, he discusses the particular insight that Hip Hop culture is able to provide to him:

**Trevor:** I think Hip Hop has definitely influenced my mind-set and my reading of particular behaviors that might manifest in the classroom. So I have I guess through my experience in Hip Hop, an understanding of some of the other determinants and factors that might be context for why people might get angry or frustrated or upset. I feel like it just gives me another level of insight and more patience you know and understanding when I see certain
things and not quick to sort of judge and respond...And maybe it’s a freedom thing too like my experience in Hip Hop, being an emcee like the opportunity to be somewhat I guess free with my expression and my language and articulating what was on my mind and my thoughts, so having experienced that and the power and the potential of opportunities to voice those things, I feel like you know I’m open to, maybe more open to than others, when I see opportunities for students to voice positively whatever’s on their mind and sometimes even in ways that might be seen as challenging authority or disruptive or whatever somebody might frame it as.

Trevor credits Hip Hop for providing him with particular insight that shapes an understanding beyond what is articulated by his students or school administration and allows him to see the context behind their behavior. In holding this insight he distinguishes himself from the school system and structures his relationships with his students through this specific and separate lens. It also provides him with a confidence that negates any fear of what may emerge from an invitation to engage the rawness, the emotion and the volatility that might erupt in the classroom. This grounding enables him to respond during moments of conflict, disruption, disorder and violence in a way that is not based in judgment, fear or the need to assert a particular kind of authority. His experiences as an emcee further extend his understanding as it provides him with a perspective that recognizes and values the freedom of expression. From his account, it would seem that Trevor has been able to develop a perspective similar to the one Lance McCready advocates for all educators who work with racialized youth and particularly those that work with young Black males:

In addition to becoming more aware of how the structure of the school can put limits on the engagement of black male students, educators need to develop their capacity for critical social and cultural analysis so that they can think outside the box of the media-induced athlete/entertainer tropes of black masculinity. In the words of African writer Ngugi wa Thiong’o, “we must decolonize our minds.” This means seeing the humanity in the baggy jeans that droop off the hips. Recognizing that the aggressiveness in the hallways is an attempt to carve out a space of respect and acceptance since the academic classroom is so often associated with failure. (2002, p. 38-39)

Hip Hop culture arguably provides room for these things to be realized and understood because of its acceptance and encouragement of the contradictory, the complex and the nuanced. The potential critical literacy in Hip Hop can be found in its refusal to compartmentalize or definitively fix any of its meanings.
Hip Hop is seldom “either/or” but more often “both/and”…Subgenres such as conscious, gangsta, reality, hard core, or party rap are commonly used in an attempt to describe different artists, but these are largely insufficient because many artists at different periods in their careers (or even within a single album) can accurately be classified into any number of these categories simultaneously. (Petchauer, 2009, p. 30)

Trevor does not shy away from the controversy that may transpire in the midst of the contradictory space that Hip Hop creates because his experience of it has made him value the importance of this complexity.

There exists a plethora of scholarship, policy research and cultural commentary on the alienation and exclusion young people – and especially young people who are poor and/or racialized - experience within schools. What has emerged in the research that I have conducted for this particular study is that there is a similar feeling of exclusion and alienation felt by educators who engage in critical Hip Hop pedagogy. Interpolated through the gaze of the institution and self-defining as distinct and separate from their colleagues and administration, these educators begin to identify with the notion of the outsider: “When social institutions deliver the message that we don’t belong, our prosocial attitudes and behaviors can quickly become anti-social.” (Morrison, et. al, 2005, p. 337) The alienation that results can manifest in what Paul Willis termed resistant cultures: “these resistant cultures supply cultural forms and shields from stigma to blunt the cruel edge of individualism and meritocracy in capitalist societies.” (2003, p.394) Trevor, alongside several other interviewees, articulates a particularly rebellious way of understanding things that he credits to Hip Hop culture. Although much of the academic scholarship on Hip Hop education has focused on the challenges of legitimizing Hip Hop culture in schools, little has explored the way this challenge ignites or stimulates a particular rebellious Hip Hop sensibility within the educators who are advocating for its inclusion. As Patricia Hill Collins notes: “…choosing to meet the needs of students can require choosing to subvert the rules rather than blindly upholding them.” (2009, p. 114) When asked what the impact of school or ministry policies were to his decisions when addressing difficult moments in the classroom Trevor responded:
**Trevor:** Part of what I think I gained from Hip Hop is this kind of like, fuck the world kinda attitude. I really could care less what you think kind of thing, you know what I mean? To be honest, I really wasn’t studying those things too tuff like. I wasn’t really studying what the policy is and what I’m supposed to necessarily be doing in this situation. Like my first responsibility really was to my own principles, values and beliefs, you know and then my responsibility to my students that I’m working with. So those were primary in my decision-making…as opposed to whatever policies that kind of exist.

Trevor’s rebel stance positions him as a distinct entity from the institution he works from and his relationship with his students is also filtered through this understanding. However this rebel stance includes many grey areas as Trevor remains an employee of the school and it’s direct representative for the students in his class.

As an employee of a New York-based organization autonomous from but working within the school, Greg argues that the effectiveness of the work he does comes from creating clear lines of distinction between the organization and the institution. Invited into schools as a contractor, Greg’s distinction from the school system is delineated by more than the rebel stance. Similarly to Trevor, Greg’s articulation of his organization’s relationship to school policies still echoes an almost rebellious stance that ensures a particular kind of credibility and authenticity unavailable to the institution:

**Greg:** Yeah. We don’t listen to the schools. (Laughs). Yeah. Like that’s part of the partnership. Basically they know that we’ve been around for a long time or for you know a pretty long time. Part of what makes [us]⁴ work is that we’re, to a level, autonomous from the school and like what happens in [the organization] stays in [the organization] and sometimes the school will, like literally, something will happen and they don’t want to deal with it so they’ll just let us deal with it. Like if our members are involved, like during the school day something would happen and they just don’t want to deal with it, they’ll be like, we’ll tell [the organization] and they’ll handle it.

The apparent success and longevity of Greg’s organization in the school and other schools across New York City allows them to maintain a particular independence. This relative autonomy feeds well into a Hip Hop anti-authoritarian stance. His articulation of the school’s respect for their strategies illustrates that there is a shared definition of

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⁴ I have used the terms “us” and “the organization” as replacements for the name of the organization in order to ensure anonymity
success and an apparent relationship of trust between the school and the organization. However the school’s off-loading of responsibility to a non-profit organization that does not receive the same level of public funding also mirrors a pattern of governments shifting public responsibility for social issues on to the already crowded work-load of service organizations. (Smith, 2009, p.8)

This mission of creating a line of distinction between Hip Hop based educators and their colleagues/the school was a recurring theme in the interviews. This delineation was achieved through a variety of strategies. Andreana Clay names particular gender-coded tools of Hip Hop performance as authenticators of Black identity for young people such as style of dress, controlled coolness, conventional attractiveness, and the right kind of joking and interaction. (p. 1354-1355) Similarly the interviewees named a particular way of understanding, insight and responsiveness as tools of authentication that distinguished their pedagogy from that of other teachers. Hazel names a Hip Hop self-assuredness and coolness that facilitates a particular kind of balanced and measured educator. She identifies the maintaining of one’s cool as something that she borrows from Hip Hop culture when teaching. It is a sentiment that was also echoed by Derek and Trevor:

**Hazel:** One similar word is confidence cause I feel like you know Hip Hop culture is about being confident and being true to yourself and your swagger and I feel like it’s always about being cool, remaining cool through everything that you do and I think that’s also the difference…between am I gonna be yelling at a student, calling them names, embarrassing them in front of other students in terms of when I’m addressing behavior or am I gonna keep my composure, maintain my cool, handle it how I can if I need to address it later, post that scenario with somebody outside of the classroom or after class or whatever to make sure we can have that one-on-one dialogue as opposed to…like I think it’s important to name inappropriate behaviors that are going on so people understand that that’s not ok in the classroom but I think the disciplinary part, especially as it relates to you know masculinity and emasculating people and the manner in which that happens with pride and ego, you have to be very careful with.

As an advocate for students working at the school board, Hazel’s experiences are not limited to a single classroom but rather are an accumulation of various observations she has noted in the numerous school she visits each week. She names her confidence, coolness and swagger as sites of connection to help build relationships with her students.
that also enables the creation of a space that does not rely on punitive measures of discipline and silencing. Her identification of various strategies of classroom management (i.e. yelling at students, calling them names, embarrassing them in front of the class) are named as potential sites of emasculation that can occur between teachers and students. In a Toronto context where the majority of the teaching staff is white and female (McCready et. al, 2010, p. 114) and where many of the students who are suspended are Black and male, there is also a racialized gender dynamic that underlies these practices.

The link between criminality and Hip Hop culture has been inextricably connected to the popular imaginary’s understanding of Black masculinity and the distinct but connected understanding of Black femininity. The rage, rawness, hyper masculinity, hyper sexualization and unapologetic nature that exists in much of the cultural products of Hip Hop culture is pointed to as corroborating evidence for this perception. This discursive construction of Hip Hop culture is one that can also be extended to various other cultural forms created and adopted by youth culture and particularly Black youth culture (ex. dancehall reggae music in the contemporary era and jazz in the past). As Rinaldo Walcott notes there are “various forms of black middle and upper-class respectability and white LGBT racism that produce a dogma that narrates black youth cultures as deracinated, dangerous, vulgar, and also dismissive” (Walcott, 2013, p. 169) Within this context, the Black male body is marked in very particular ways in the contemporary classroom that may be deemed simultaneously threatening, unwelcome and unstable.

The unapologetic assertion of self that is a hallmark of Hip Hop culture further contributes to this understanding of certain bodies as generally threatening and dangerous. Michael Jeffries writes about the conscious assertion of one of the more dangerous and threatening manifestations of Black masculinity to explode in the popular imaginary, in part (but definitely holding a much more historicized origin) thanks to Hip Hop culture: that of the Hip Hop thug:

   Thugs learn that laws are not applied to them as they are to others, so living “outside the manna of the gods,” the hip-hop thug makes his own moral and political laws, borrowing from both acceptable (love-driven and hopeful) and despicable (violent,
exploitative, and nihilistic) models of the universe. While the politics of respectability argues that being poor and black does not make someone a criminal, thug discourse thumbs its nose at the establishment and plainly says, “If simply being me, born poor and black in the ghetto, is criminal and wrong, I don’t want to be right.” Thug narratives embrace the criminal label and stretch its meaning. (Jeffries, 2011, p. 88)

Hip Hop culture and in particular the thug narrative, offers the opportunity to present a counter-story to the prevailing normative discourse of equal opportunity and meritocracy championed by the public schooling system, challenging “the logic of the majoritarian story and its supposed commitment to a socially just democracy” (Baszile, 2009, p. 10-11) However this type of oppositional knowledge can also serve to authorize violence against those assumed to be the so-called Hip Hop thug in the name of presumably legitimate and justified fear.

The voice that emerges from this oppositional knowledge is one highly steeped in risk for the social order. Paul Willis argues that the moment a population of people who have been historically subjugated begin to develop a culture of expression, this can be deemed as a threat to those invested in current structures and ways of knowing:

> The emergence of a subordinate expressive subject concerns members of the majority popular classes taking for themselves…something that only the elite have enjoyed as part of their sacred privilege. This privilege entails the formation of sensibilities to mark oneself culturally as a certain kind of person – rather than simply an unconscious carrier of traditional markers of class, race, and gender – or to “choose” to belong to these categories in distinctive, mannered, celebratory, or self-conscious ways. This is to take part in self-formation on relatively autonomous expressive grounds, rather than to be formed from outside on automatically ascribed grounds. The connection of the “given self” to variable external symbolic forms reflects the desire not just to take up social or material space in a way governed by others, but to matter culturally. (Willis, 2003, p. 404-405)

The potential threat implicit in this process of self-formation can lead to various attempts to suppress and deny the emergence of this determination. Hazel’s observation of the ways that educators attempt to emasculate students through public humiliation in the name of classroom order can be argued as one of these strategies. The assumptions of criminality and subsequent fear associated with Blackness, Black masculinity and Hip Hop culture permeates into the doubt and suspicion that often arises when Hip Hop Education is introduced into school systems. “Unconscious and conscious fears of black males and the fear and shame of harboring these thoughts and feelings are
reflected in many teachers’ biases against rap and hip hop, about which they know little.” (Hanley, 2007, p. 38) One Black male educator from Toronto brought up this fear when describing his own challenges in attempting to legitimize Hip Hop based education in his school:

**Trevor:** Ok so I feel like there’s some inherent challenges because our schools are mostly populated by educators who are white, you know, white females actually mostly and I guess that’s not to say that white females, some of them aren’t into Hip Hop but I feel like my experience was that I had like colleagues who I think, not even think I know thought much of what I did was dangerous. They felt like I created an unsafe environment and this was articulated to me that’s how I know this. They thought that I created an unsafe environment because…I had a dangerous relationship with the students…they basically felt like I was too soft on the students…because I wasn’t sending them to the office or whatever…and they felt (that) some of the stuff that I was exploring in my classroom wasn’t real curriculum right?

In the example given by Trevor, not only was Hip Hop culture deemed dangerous by his colleagues but so too was the pedagogy because it was unreadable and unintelligible within the language of the social order. The teacher himself was considered threatening in the potential connections and relationship he was building with his students. These relationships between a Black male teacher and his class, a class that was made up mostly of racialized students, undermined the normative processes of control, regulation and management.

Many of the educators interviewed for this study articulated the need to position themselves in a rebel stance and build relationships with their students that specifically distinguished them from the institution that they work for. However in doing so, they themselves became targets of these institutions as their work was viewed – to varying degrees - with suspicion, unease and doubt.

### 4.2 The Cipher and the Safe Space

When asked to describe the strategies used to respond to issues of conflict, violence and disruption in the classroom many of the educators identified the classroom space as huge component in determining not only what needed to be done but also the frequency and severity of the situations themselves. As teachers, the classroom was also seen as a
specific site where their leadership could be asserted. Many spoke in tones that revealed a particular kind of investment in and ownership over the space. The classroom is a space that numerous teachers identify as their own, a space where “their position and authority were more secure.” (Luttrell, et. al, 2006, p. 148)

The classroom for many educators also determined what was possible in their pedagogical strategies. Toronto educator Derek recognizes that his strategies of intense communication and purposeful dialogue are possible because of the physical realities of his classroom. He acknowledges that because of the small class size, he is able to develop particular kinds of relationships with his students that impact the way he addresses conflict in the classroom:

**Derek:** So it’s even structural right a lot of my classes are pretty small so I have a lot of time to get to know the students, talk to them, to develop a relationship with them. So it’s even that versus some of the other classes or schools. Bigger schools where there’s less time and potentially more trouble-makers the discipline is not gonna be as rich.

The right to mobility and organization of space were factors also mentioned by several teachers as determinants for the effectiveness of their classroom. Chris, a New York educator who uses Hip Hop therapy in his educational practice, intentionally challenges the conventional structures of classroom and group counseling spaces by providing his students with the agency to move and sit where and how they please:

**Chris:** So it’s very youth-driven so like I don’t align the desks in any type of way. I think in traditional spaces it’s like you’ll have, like in counseling spaces you’ll have a circle. I kind of let students go where they want to go to in the room because I don’t really want to manage that, I don’t see a point as long as they’re not having a side conversation in the back, then it’s like come on, you have to like be involved, we’re a group. But I sort of let them sit where they want. When we get up and we rap, it naturally forms a cipher which is a circle which is kind of cool to see because counseling sessions usually happen in a circle and it’s funny how that naturally happens. It’s just a classroom with desks and I let students sit anywhere so we’ll have students sitting on top of desks, and students just sitting on a chair without a desk, you know whatever. We’ll have students standing up against a wall, anywhere they are comfortable as long as they’re like engaged in the process, I don’t care at all.
Chris’ alternative classroom structure has particular resonance in the context of a space focused on critical Hip Hop pedagogy. The students are given the freedom of choice and minimal restriction because the emphasis is put on their participation and comfort rather than a static notion of structure and rigid order. This freedom and respect for his students supported the building of trust within the space. The inclusion of Hip Hop in the classroom, something that is typically students’ “out-of-school (and hallway) culture” means that students are put “in a rare position of curricular authority.” (Low, p. 2) The option to move around and shift positions in a similar way as the teacher creates a lessening of hierarchical authority in their relationship as both parties exercise the freedom of mobility.

Greg, another educator from New York, also attempts to challenge the power dynamics inherent to the classroom by specifically structuring the seating of the students in a circle to invoke the use of the cipher:

**Greg:** We try to have every space that we facilitate be in a cipher and that’s to represent the equality in the room and even though we’re facilitating it, we want the students to feel ownership of everything that we do in the classroom and to feel that they can question or say what’s on their mind at any time in the classroom.

A cipher can be defined as:

The communal, circular space where hip-hoppers express themselves individually and collectively through dancing, rapping, or competing (i.e. battling) to music often played by an accompanying DJ. The term is also used symbolically to represent an extended community of hip-hoppers. (Petchauer, p.967)

Although not immediately directly engaging any of the artistic elements listed in the above definition, Greg still names his structure a cipher because it maintains the principles of individual and collective expression shared in a circular space. Greg’s conception of the cipher as a space where each voice is heard and equality is integral also borrows from practices of restorative justice that invoke the use of Peacemaking Circles. Tanya Aravitidis articulates the way that Peacemaking Circles can be used to address conflict through their practices and principles:

Circles draw upon various democratic and egalitarian practices to reveal the knowledge, experience and competencies of all participants: They never contain a “leader”, they guarantee all participants equal opportunities to speak and be heard,
and no person is ever forcibly included or excluded from the process. Because everyone involved in the process has an equal voice, and because consensus decisions must be acceptable to all participants, it follows that resolutions must always address the interests of everyone to a fair degree. Ultimately, the Peacemaking Circle epitomized a social order based on mutual respect and parity for all participants. (Aravitidis, n.d., p. 22-23)

Although no interviewees specifically named the Peacemaking Circle as a strategy used in their pedagogy, the use of circles as ciphers called on similar principles of equal opportunity for voice and expression. Toronto educator Theresa also intentionally begins her class in a circle that utilizes similar principles of inclusion and mutual respect:

Theresa: I always start and end in a circle. I always begin with all of the students standing and linking arms in a circle and what I say is that “I want to begin by grounding and acknowledging where we stand, acknowledging the fact that we’re here on Native land, on Indigenous land, on conquered land, on stolen land and that there’s a history and a legacy to the places that we stand and the places that we teach from and all of that deserves respect and as we move forward I want to invite you to open up a space of respect where we can feel safe to go deeper into telling our truths and opening up a space of honesty so that we can honor each other in our own individual truths and feel safe to do that. So if you are ok with this and are down to create that space for each other, please say your name and say I’m in.”

Theresa’s circle creates an opportunity for students to reflect on the historical significance of the moment they are in and also acts as an invitation to participate which they can (theoretically) accept or decline. As an arts educator in Toronto who visits various schools, Theresa is able to provide students with this freedom to choose whether or not they want to participate, an option not as clearly available for teachers mandated and paid by the school board.

Extending this discussion on the importance of developing a classroom space that facilitates relationships of mutual respect and structures of equality, this theme of preparation and consideration before conflict occurs was persistently discussed in the interviews. Part of the process for addressing conflict in the classroom named by numerous interviewees was the attempt to be proactive and build a safe space for students. This argument for being proactive has also been mobilized by scholars in the field of restorative justice who recognize that reacting to incidents after the fact is not as effective as creating conditions to prevent the incidents’ occurrence:
What has more recently emerged is the recognition that restorative practice also needs to be proactive, immersing the school community in a pedagogy that values relationships and a curriculum that values social and emotional learning. These proactive practices recognize that managing relationships and resolving conflict are important life skills which assist in the de-escalation of conflict before serious incidents arise. (Morrison, et. al, 2005, p. 338)

Greg argues that a safe space is a necessary foundation in order for learning to occur. His articulation of a safe space calls on all parties involved to view the space as a privilege and part of a larger history and legacy that they are contributing to:

**Greg:** I think part of the basic tenets of education is having a safe space and so for a group to come together and to understand their purpose and the sacredness of education and of that tradition in order to make sure that everyone feels like they can learn and they can share and they can reflect openly and be who they are, there has to be an understanding of what everyone can and should be doing to themselves and to one another.

Greg’s approach moves away from the notion of education as a means to end, and rather asks students to see each moment within the space as a distinct opportunity to recognize themselves and each other in their reflections and offerings. Here process is valued over product and relationships are emphasized in the rituals and practices employed. Patricia Hill Collins echoes some of Greg’s sentiments when she writes:

The worst physical spaces can be made into a vibrant location if it is, first, safe (a major reason kids skip school or behave as they do in classrooms is that they think their environment is unsafe); and second, free, that is, a space where they can share unpopular, scary, provocative and, most basically, political thoughts and have those thoughts taken seriously and not dismissed as out of hand. Kids need ownership over the space. A safe space is one that protects kids from the dangers that lie outside it and where the rules that regulate its internal workings protect them as well. A free space is one where kids are accepted and that defends democratic participation. Safe and free spaces are the bedrock of democratic processes. (p. 92)

Chris also argues the importance of creating a safe space to mitigate the possibility of violence and conflict. He creates his safe space by directly participating in the activities he asks his students to engage in. This strategy not only models the activity but also allows students to see that Chris is just as willing to take the steps that he is asking his students to take and creates a point of connection as both parties simultaneously occupy spaces of vulnerability:

**Chris:** Prior to conflict even starting, the ability to create that space in a room where it’s ok to talk about feelings, I do like through Hip Hop. So I’ll model how we can talk about emotions here by like rapping a song of my own that
showcases emotional exploration right and so I’m using Hip Hop directly there as an art form to show them that we can do this here, we can talk about things and then we’ll have a conversation about the lyrics and then compare it to other things so we’re creating that space.

The discourse of creating safe spaces is powerfully pervasive as educators from both New York and Toronto demonstrated. However what does it mean to construct a safe space when working with human beings who can at any moment make a space unsafe by comment, physical action or general demeanor? Is a safe space even possible? When I was trained as a researcher at the Centre for Women and Trans People at York University, they taught me that it is not possible to ever create a guaranteed safe space, but it is possible to consistently develop and implement practices and procedures that attempt to ensure the safety of the space. Kevin Kumashiro similarly argues that the creation of safe spaces is an ongoing process:

Educators should create safe spaces based on what they see is needed right now, but they should also constantly re-create the spaces by asking, whom does this space harm or exclude? They should create supportive programs, but should also constantly re-create the programs by asking, what practices does this program foreclose and make unthinkable? They should engage in equitable and relevant pedagogies, but should also constantly rethink their pedagogies by asking, whom does this pedagogy miss or silence? Without constantly complicating the very terms of “the Other,” an education “for the Other” will not be able to address the ways it always and already misses some Others. (2000, p. 31)

This process of constant evaluation, reflection and recreation is a challenge for those educators working within the parameters of educational institutions. When required to report and evaluate through the lens of Ministry defined and regulated standards of education the consideration of safe space development becomes secondary to measurements of achievement. However my research has illustrated the steadfast commitment of numerous educators who are attempting to find this balance.

A collective investment in the space created so that it has value and is available for everyone to contribute to, is an integral component for creating a “classroom community.” (Korinek et. al, 1999, p. 3) Trevor discussed the importance of creating the necessary conditions for students to feel invested and comfortable in the learning process by describing the importance of affirmation:

Trevor: I try to create conditions that will create an environment where students feel included where they feel comfortable, where they feel valued,
where they feel affirmed. And I believe that through doing that, it creates a space where you’re more likely to have collaboration and positive interactions when conflicts do occur. Again I see myself as a facilitator. So how could I facilitate a restoration of broken relationships or tensions as opposed to managing them and managing people’s behaviors.

Trevor’s process of creating a safe space includes a consideration of healing and restoration that extends beyond the moments in the classroom to a historical consideration of the ways that relationships between people have been created in unhealthy and destructive ways. He does this by collaboratively building a classroom space that values inclusivity, affirmation, collaboration and positivity. Numerous interviewees discussed the importance of affirming student experience and voice and indeed within Lost Lyrics this discourse of affirmation was called upon extensively when we attempted to describe the importance of our work. However Kevin Kumashiro warns about the dangers inherent to an education relies heavily on affirmation:

the “problem” that anti-oppressive education needs to address is not merely a lack of knowledge, but a resistance to knowledge, and in particular, a resistance to any knowledge that disrupts what one already “knows.” Britzman for example, suggests that we unconsciously desire to learn only that which affirms our sense that we are good people and that we resist learning anything that reveals our complicity with racism, homophobia, and other forms of oppression. (2000, p. 43)

A safe space needs to create the mechanisms necessary to support students and teachers when they are confronted with challenges that shift their sense of self and force them into spaces of discomfort. Interviewees did not bring up this more challenging aspect of safe space development and the impact this can have on the relationships they build with their students. Their silence may reflect the boundaries of their pedagogy. Although speaking from a context of anti-oppressive education, many of Kevin Kumashiro’s observations can be utilized when considering the topics and themes inherent to a critical Hip Hop pedagogy. He argues that:

anti-oppressive education involves crisis…Talking about one’s own experience with and complicity in oppression and, perhaps most importantly, learning things that force one to re-learn or unlearn what one had previously learned cannot always be done rationally…Though paradoxical and in some ways traumatic, this condition should be expected: by teaching students that the very ways in which we think and do things can be oppressive, teachers should expect their students to get upset. Consequently, educators need to create a space in their curriculum for students to work through crisis. (Kumashiro, 2000, p. 44)
Proactively creating space to deal with the difficult arenas of the classroom was something many of the interviewees addressed. The capacity to proactively combat disruptions, conflict, and violence in the classroom was articulated as a marker of experience. Trevor noted that this preparation is something that distinguishes the various experiences of teachers dealing with the same student:

**Trevor:** I feel like there’s a proactive piece that I always want to acknowledge because I feel like you know when you go through a school and you visit different classrooms and even throughout a day and you’ll see the same student who in one classroom you know is going buck wild and then another classroom they’re totally focused and they’re engaged, you know? And so I feel like a lot of this has to do with again the environment, the relationship that’s established, a lot of the proactive kinda pieces. So I feel like when you ask me well how do you mitigate conflict, I feel like really I spend like 90% of my time mitigating conflict by doing proactive things in my work with students.

Hazel similarly discusses the ways that proactively attempting to create a safe space and constantly nurturing healthy relationships between educators and students supports the creation of a classroom that does not have to deal with the same kind of conflicts and situations that other classrooms may have.

**Hazel:** I feel like when you create a safe space in your classroom with students that you work with on a consistent basis, when the respect is established you don’t have to regulate behaviors in the ways that other teachers who don’t have relationships and aren’t able to create those spaces have to manage behaviors. And that’s not to say that sometimes you do have to say like “Is everyone finished? We’re not gonna move forward until everyone’s on the same page. Please respect me as I am respecting you.” But I definitely know that there’s teachers who get erasers thrown at them and spit balls in their heads and then there’s teachers that you walk into a class and everyone is sitting circular and you know you see students just sharing and talking with one another like a family environment so I definitely think it’s the teacher that creates the space. Whether they’re going to need the behavioral modification strategies is going to be dependent on that teacher’s pedagogy and practice. So I feel like if they’ve established relationships then the managing behavior stuff doesn’t look the same.

Both Trevor and Hazel place a large amount of responsibility on the teacher to facilitate and determine the kind of classroom environment that is created. Neither educator mentions the behavior of the student as the determinant of how safe or well-functioning a classroom will be but rather the skills and capacity of the teacher to facilitate space.
Kathy complicates the notion of safe space by recognizing that attempting to create a safe space within one’s classroom does not mean that disruption, conflict and violence will not occur but it does mean developing the relationships so that it can be mitigated or resolved in a responsible way that is accountable to the space after the fact:

**Kathy:** When you as the classroom teacher create an environment that is a safe space, students will resolve conflict much more easily than they will in a space that they don’t feel safe. Or if they trust their educator, they will go to their educator and say “Yo, this person, yo I’m gonna punch this person in the face if they don’t stop, you need to regulate.” And so I think that it really is dependent on the teacher because how you run your classroom, your pedagogy, your relationships with those youth, will determine not only what kind of events happen in your class, because sometimes people could just be in bad moods or have bad days or whatever and stuff could just start poppin’ or get live before anybody knows what’s going on really. And then obviously how you deal with it afterwards will either continue to keep that safe space or destroy it. And so sometimes to me it’s not even the event that’s important, but how you deal with the event afterwards that becomes almost more important in terms of the environment of your classroom and the classroom teacher.

Kathy brings up the important element of dealing with the aftermath of the situation. Through building relationships and trust with her students she is able not only to mitigate conflict but also to address it through honest and open communication directly following it’s occurrence. However these relationships can also become complex terrain in the midst of an unequal power dynamic and requires a shared understanding of where the boundaries for acceptable and unacceptable behavior lie.

### 4.3 Moments of Conflict and the Hidden Curriculum

Much of the literature on critical Hip Hop pedagogy focuses on the curriculum that is developed. When speaking of curriculum in the context of this research, I transcend the more conventional definition that is characterized by textbooks, externally defined standards and particular lesson plans and instead highlight the more insidious notion of the hidden-curriculum (Jackson, 1968). Within this subtle and subversive space of learning, identities are negotiated through the symbols and standards of what is deemed normative and what has been marked as deviant. “To this extent curriculum not only reflects identities but also creates identities.” (Baszile, 2009, p. 10) Much of what is
learned about how to function in society occurs through a hidden curriculum of teaching (Collins, 2009, p. 4) that is not delivered through overt instructional content but rather is taught through the normalized everyday practices that structure and define the classroom and school environment. This hidden curriculum includes “the importance of obedience to authority, punctuality, delayed gratification, as well as the naturalness of competition and hierarchy through systems such as tracking.” (Low, 2011, p.2) This hidden curriculum is consistently engaged but rarely articulated as something that is learned. As a result, through its simultaneous repetition and silence this hidden curriculum is made a naturalized and normalized presence considered virtually inherent and synonymous with schooling. (Kumashiro, 2000, p.36) This invisible methodology for defining success and failure, ethics and morality is filtered directly into the school norms that determine right and wrong student behavior:

‘Appropriate’ management of schools becomes that management which produces social-order-congruent citizens, i.e., productive citizens. ‘Appropriate’ student behavior is that behavior that is obedient to or congruent with current conceptions of productive citizenry. Just as citizens are taught what sanity is by the marking, defining, excluding and confining of the ‘insane’, productive students are disciplined not through the marking, defining, excluding and confining of their bodies but by the public application of these processes to the bodies of unproductive students. (Scheurich, 1994, p. 307)

The management of students occurs not only through the identifying, separating and punishment of students who do not comply but also through the witnessing of this process by all other students. Bearing witness to another student’s reprimand, detention, suspension or expulsion, young people come to know what is considered good and bad behavior, how good and bad behavior is rewarded and punished and with this knowledge begin to self-regulate and self-manage accordingly.

The public disciplining of students can also result in a form of public humiliation for the individual identified by the teacher. Public embarrassment is a key marker of retributive justice because it focuses on “guilt, rule breaking and administration of pain as punishment.” (Pawlychka, 2012, p. 5) Brenda Morrison argues that this shaming can be internalized and then manifest into a “psychological barrier to an individual’s journey to belonging within a community.” (2003, p. 694) The danger of publicly correcting student behavior was also brought up by critical Hip Hop educator Theresa.
Theresa: You know there’s a difference between helping a young person understand that something is not appropriate behavior as opposed to shaming them and then now making them feel like they’re wrong at the core. Maybe the behavior wasn’t appropriate but that doesn’t necessarily mean that you’re a bad person. It doesn’t necessarily mean that you should be like ashamed of yourself.

Theresa’s distinction between the individual and the incident echoes a restorative justice model of reintegrative shaming. It “emphasizes the separation between offence and offender…This requires denunciation of the behavior while reaffirming the morality of the offender and maintaining support as the offender learns the impact of and methods to repair harms.” (Pawlchyka, 2012, p. 30) Hazel similarly recognizes that a public denunciation of the offense is not an automatic go-to strategy but is sometimes necessary when one considers the impact the incident has had on the class:

Hazel: For me it’s about harm. So if somebody says something that I think is harmful to themselves, harmful to potentially somebody else in the classroom or harmful to the space that we’ve created, that’s when I address it. If someone’s like “yo, my fucking mother’s a fucking bitch” am I gonna address that in front of the whole class? Probably not. I’ll wait until after to be like, “What’s going on at home? Are you ok?” If someone’s like “Black mothers don’t care about their kids.” That’s something that I’m gonna address in the classroom cause that’s something that’s harmful to themselves if they may identify and it’s hurtful to other people who are in the class and the space that we’ve created.

Hazel’s strategy can be viewed as a form of reintegrative shaming “within a community of care” that “offers respect to the individual, while not condoning the behavior.” (Morrison, 2003, p. 694) It also incorporates a measure of accountability that extends to the community as it considers the potential damage things stated publicly can have on others beyond the speaker. Public accountability is integral to Hip Hop culture where respect by and from community is contingent upon being accountable to the expectations and standards the community holds an individual to.

Hazel’s illustration of the various things she evaluates in a single moment in order to strategically determine how she handles a situation reminds us that there are multiple components that inform the decisions teachers make during difficult moments in the classroom:
What anxieties and emotions are tapped as teachers wrestle with their decisions about what battles to pick in their everyday interactions with youth? Why do teachers intervene with some students but not with others? Why do teachers intervene about some issues and not others, in some spaces, such as classrooms, more than in others, such as corridors? How do teachers struggle with issues of ethical responsibility – responsibility to the community, responsibility to the students, and responsibility to themselves? (Luttrell et. al, 2006, p. 145)

Wendy Luttrell brings up the emotional and mental impact that making these critical decisions during high stake situations can have on an educator. The degree of stress that comes with this type of responsibility cannot be considered lightly. Trevor’s process for dealing with issues that come up in the classroom also takes into his own role as the teacher to not only address the incident in the moment but also reflect with his students around the decisions each of them made and consider alternative routes.

**Trevor:** When something pops off I guess one of my things is, as much as possible not to be in this sort of hyper-reactive kind of state. I think first, I try to give people space, you know because sometimes people just need time to think about what’s happened, to reflect, myself included. So I create a space by separating, if there’s a tension between two people, trying to separate and give them a little time to reflect on that and then helping to facilitate on an individual basis conversations around what, from their perspectives led to the conflict, what kind of feelings or emotions might be associated with that and then reflective thinking around how did I respond in that situation? Did it achieve, what was the end result of that response? What are different ways to respond that might achieve the same or different end goal that might have been more productive or that helped them to achieve where they were hoping to end up with in the particular situation. So a part of that for me is like trying to avoid power struggles, you know. Of not trying to call people out in the middle of everybody just to embarrass them or whatever.

Trevor’s process requires that he also participate in reflection not only as a mediator but also as someone implicated in the incident who made choices that impacted the classroom. His step-by-step description does not include the involvement of any outside parties such as the administration, school counselors or social workers. Rather he focuses on repairing the relationships by communicating with the people in the space. This reluctance to involve the outside is a familiar component of numerous African Diasporic cultures including Hip Hop that maintain distrust for anything outside of the culture/community and advocate for dealing with matters internally. From N.W.A.’s “Fuck the Police” to the rise of the “No Snitch” culture to Jay-Z’s snide commentary to a social media obsessed generation on the track “Somewhere in America” when he rhymed
“Might crash ya Internet/And I ain’t even into that/When I was talking Instagram/Last thing you wanted was your picture snapped” this skepticism of the outside has been a consistent presence throughout Hip Hop culture.

However this reluctance is not universal as is exemplified in the case of Derek, another Black male teacher in Toronto, who utilizes very different strategies to address an ongoing situation in his classroom:

Derek: Sometimes it gets ugly. There were a few situations this year that got really ugly so I don’t like to yell but sometimes I have to discipline students directly and I had one student was very very hostile over the past two months and I handled the situation with her social worker and other administrators so we can figure out what’s going on, what’s the best thing. So we had to address the students’ behavior a couple times, had to just address it in the classroom you know in terms of swearing, that kind of stuff and also follow-ups with one-on-one conversations in the counselors office and calls to the parents and you know, multiple different approaches. This situation wasn’t successful. I mean, in terms of discipline, she had to be removed from class. A couple of times the student was suspended so it wasn’t a good situation but it goes back to my recognition that it wasn’t, I mean this student has so many issues that she dealt with this year. Family issues, all kinds of stuff. So sometimes that hostility is based on the student never even being taught how to handle their situation, their problem, so that comes back to the whole socializing thing.

Derek’s strategies for dealing with this situation included seeking outside support from various spaces in his school including a social worker, administrators, parents and a counselor. He considers the other things that are going on in the student’s life and attempts to understand the context that she emerges from. However, unlike Trevor his lens of analysis does not at all take into account a need to reflect on his own decisions and actions or the impact his decision has on the relationship he is building with his student. His collaboration with administrators, social workers and counselors serve as additional affirmations that the problem lies within the student and there is no need for him as educator to reflect. The final decisions to suspend the student and remove her from his class are deemed as the inevitable outcome of the decisions made by the student as a result of the personal issues at home that she is reacting to.
The high propensity of schools that resort to exclusion and ostracism through the literal physical separation of ‘troublesome’ students from the rest of the classroom via detention, suspension and expulsion, reveals an emphasis on behavior management and social control as the priority of schooling over classroom learning and education. Various scholars have argued that school concerns over behavioral management often take precedence over academic progress and development as arguments of students’ bad behavior becomes couched in a language of violence, safety and control. (Morrison, 2003, p. 689, Noguera, 2003, p. 342). This hyper-concern has resulted in zero-tolerance policies being officially and unofficially (as was argued by interviewee Hazel) adopted by schools. These zero-tolerance polices have led to a direct increase in the number of students who are being suspended and expelled from school. (Noguera, 2003, p. 342) These students are also marked by gender and race as the numbers across North American urban schools illustrate “large gaps in suspensions and expulsions – ‘discipline gaps’ – between Black male students and their non-White peers.” (McCready, et. al, 2010, p. 113)

Although hesitant and wary of the word punishment, Derek does acknowledge his belief in consequences for student action and views these consequences as relatively light in relation to what awaits these students beyond the school:

**Derek:** So I support consequences and sometimes I have to enforce the students but I let them know that being punished in a school, I mean at least with me in my schools, it’s something that they should try and appreciate just because of the fact that it’s not gonna affect their overall success in the way that other punishments outside of the school are going to. So a job you know or the police, that kind of stuff. If I have to enforce consequences I’m always gonna be there you know when you come back to the school, if you’re suspended, to address the issue and move forward.

His commitment to always be there for the students sets him apart from the systems outside of the school that will teach them other types of lessons in the future. However Derek seems to belittle or fails to recognize the dangerous patterns that are instigated through the strategies of exclusion utilized in his previous examples. It has been demonstrated in numerous studies that youth who have been suspended and/or expelled
face a higher risk of dropout and incarceration. (Townsend, 2000, p. 382, Christle et. al, 2005, p. 70, Ruck et. al, p. 186) The effects of this on students is often monumental:

A large body of research has shown that labeling and exclusion practices can create a self-fulfilling prophesy and result in a cycle of antisocial behavior that can be difficult to break. As they get older, the rule violations perpetrated by such students often increase in frequency and severity resulting in a steady escalation in the sanctions that are applied. For many, the cycle of punishment eventually leads to entanglement with law enforcement and the criminal justice system. (Noguera, 2003, p. 343)

This connection between the education and incarceration system is often called the school to prison pipeline. The rationale behind exclusionary strategies within schools often echoes many of the rationales used to legitimize incarceration:

Following the official repudiation of the philosophy of rehabilitation in the 1970s, today’s prison has for sole purpose to neutralize offenders – and individuals thought to be likely to violate the law, such as parolees – both materially, by removing them physically into an institutional enclave, and symbolically, by drawing a hard and fast line between criminals and law-abiding citizens. The ‘law-and-order’ paradigm that has achieved undivided hegemony in crime and justice policy over the past two decades jettisons any notion of prevention and proportionality in favor of direct appeals to popular resentment through measures that dramatize the fear and loathing of crime viewed as the abhorrent conduct of defective individuals. ‘Such appeals to resentment,’ writes Hirsch, ‘reflect an ideology of purging “undesirables” from the body politic’ in which incarceration is essentially a means for social and moral excommunication. That makes the mission of today’s prison identical to that of the classical ghetto whose raison d’etre was precisely to quarantine a polluting group from the urban body. (Waquant, 2001, p. 112)

Louis Waquant’s analysis draws on the discourse of retributive justice that argues the exclusion of the individual for the sake of the majority. Not all of the interviewees believed that exclusionary measures were a negative practice and rather argued that it was a beneficial strategy in helping students to mature and understand the notion of limits and the sacred process of trust-building. Chris argued that boundaries are essential in the creation of a space where trust needs to be established and that if boundaries are crossed, exclusion from space can be the most appropriate strategy taken by the educator.

**Chris:** Well, I think part of group counseling is working to establish trust and setting norms with young people throughout the process and yeah I mean like there’s sort of a no-tolerance for disrespect unless it’s willing to be, if somebody says something in the moment cause they’re heated, it’s like we’ll debrief on that and if we can’t then like, if somebody is riled up enough to where we can’t have a conversation about what’s going on in the room, than yeah there have been times where we have to remove people from the
classroom. I don’t like doing that. I’m only gonna do that if that’s absolutely what has to be done. So I think ideally we can converse about conflict or anything that’s going on in the room but if we can’t we’ll remove someone.

Chris considers exclusion as a last resort but one that he leaves open and available when all other strategies have failed. Theresa, like Chris believes that boundaries are a fundamental part of teaching young people how to be accountable:

**Theresa:** I think every adult should have some role in terms of helping to shape the boundaries of our young people or at least holding them within safe and you know responsible containers because kids need boundaries right? They need to know what’s right, what’s wrong, what’s acceptable, what’s not acceptable but not in like a disciplinary like oh I’m you’re superior and I hold power therefore you must obey. Not like that because that is a blind way of approaching managing behavior if you will right? It needs to be, teachers should play a role of guidance right? They should play a role of helping the young people understand that if certain behaviors are inappropriate, why they’re inappropriate, and where that comes from so that the young people can get a deeper understanding within themselves about why they are behaving in the way that they are and where does that come from.

Much of Theresa’s response is couched in a discourse of morality as she uses terms such as right and wrong, appropriate and inappropriate. The guidance she argues that teachers should provide students in these matters is discursively shaped and there is no universal definition to rely upon for the definition of these ideas.

Trevor on the other hand argues that removing students from the classroom is something that has the potential to create irreparable damage in the relationship between student and teacher:

**Trevor:** So when I approach discipline or discipline is the wrong word really, but when I approach healing sort of those broken situations it’s very much about all the parties that are involved and not about separating the person who may appear to be the person committing the act because I feel like once you put that person outside of the space and basically send the message that I can’t deal with you and I don’t want you here right now, then it’s totally counterproductive because you still have to build the relationship with that person and at some point they’re coming back into your space so now what are you gonna do? I feel like, I’m totally, I’m like boggled when I see people do that because you’re just giving away your potential and power for a positive relationship with this person.
Alongside the dangers of hurting relationships the act of exclusion also requires involving an outside body to be a part of the disciplinary process for an incident that occurred in the classroom. Often this outside party is an administrator or more senior authority and this positional distinction in power can serve to “undercut a teacher’s authority within the classroom…” (Morrison et. al, 2005, p. 349) Ownership over the problem is something that is required in order for resolution to occur because “once a problem is passed to a third party, punishment is often the typical response, as ownership for the problem has begun to erode and with this, effective responses.” (Morrison et. al, 2005, p. 349)

Brenda Morrison argues for a restorative justice approach “that values both accountability and support.” (2003, p.692) Greg believes in holding students accountable for their actions through the use of consequences that often require tangible action towards repairing the damage caused by their actions or giving back to the space that they disrupted:

**Greg:** I guess I never thought about it as punishment (laughs) more as consequences. But yeah, I would say consequences. So whether someone has to write you know an essay or address the group together, if they’ve done a serious infringement against the agreements of the group we have them address the group and apologize and explain their behavior and their intention to not reproduce that. Same thing sometimes in written form you know if somebody’s like really shy that they just don’t want to go up there. Yeah I would say it’s not very punitive like a detention, you know it’s not like you have to go to 5 detentions and then you’re good but it’s about that young person understanding what they did and then doing something. We talk a lot about energy. Like if you disrupt the energy, if you took away from the energy, what are you now doing to pay back that energy and contribute to the group? So whether that’s a written statement, a spoken statement or an act of service.

He goes on to detail the fundamental importance behind this notion of teaching students to take reflective responsibility for their actions and understand the concept of accountability:

**Greg:** So you know it’s about getting to an understanding about each party owning their fault whether you’re involvement in the incident was only 2% but to understand that 2% or that 5% or whatever percentage of responsibility that you have. And so that usually is the hardest and most important part. Once you get someone to acknowledge their role you know it’s, yes they’re
taking the blame but at the same time they’re empowering themselves because once you take responsibility for everything then you know then no one can do anything to you.

Greg argues that this opportunity to take responsibility can actually be seen as a moment of empowerment for students. Justice becomes a process that is not enacted from above or outside but rather becomes an intimate and personal experience of ownership and recognition. Scholars of restorative justice have argued that certain conditions need to be in place in order for individual responsibility for an incident to be taken:

Selznick (1996) argues that the development of communal bonds through a participatory regulatory framework is central to the development of personal responsibility: “Personal responsibility is most likely to flourish when there is genuine opportunity to participate in communal life. These conditions require substantial investment by the community and its institutions. At the same time, how much the community invests, and what kind of investment it makes, will depend on the prevalence of a sense of personal responsibility for the common good. (Morrison, 2005, et. al, p. 336)

Students need to feel invested and connected to the classroom community in order for the realization of individual responsibility to occur. The relationships between students and between students and teachers in the space then becomes of paramount importance in order for accountability to be taken.

4.4 Teacher Perceptions of Race, Class and Gender

After asking each of the educators to recount an experience where they had to address a conflict, disruption or violent incident in the classroom, I asked them to consider whether race, class or gender played a role in the incident or in how they handled it. Before getting to their responses it is important to question how they determined what qualified as an incident and what did not. James Joseph Scheurich importantly takes us a few steps back and challenges the ‘givenness’ of what is rarely contested as a social problem:

By what process did a particular problem emerge, or better, how did a particular problem come to be seen as a problem? What makes the emergence of a particular problem possible? Why do some ‘problems’ become identified as social problems while other ‘problems’ do not achieve that level of identification? By what process does a social problem gain the ‘gaze’ of the state, of the society and thus, emerge from a kind of social invisibility into visibility? (Scheurich, 1994, p. 300)
Nearly all of the educators recounted narratives that involved racialized students. Here is a table recounting the types of incidences that were recounted and the number of times participants brought them up. Repeat stories are not included:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Incident</th>
<th>Number of Times Recounted</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physical Violence</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbal Violence</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involving a Weapon</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significant Classroom Disruption by Student</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students Make Racist or Culturally Insensitive Remarks</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students Make Remarks Condoning Sexual Violence</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significant Classroom Disruption by Colleagues</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Classroom is Silenced by a Student</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Despite the number of incidences shared where students made racist or culturally insensitive remarks, these experiences did not translate into a nuanced consideration of how race operates in the classroom. Many of the interviewees chose to respond to the consideration of race, gender and class as individual categories, selecting which one’s they believed were relevant for the moment rather than as intersecting and interlocking realities. In describing a situation where she asked three young Black males who were consistently disruptive in a Hip Hop Education program for Black students to stop attending, Julia identified only gender as playing a role in the scenario:

**Julia:** So gender definitely played a role because I feel boys mature slower than girls. Race and class I don’t feel had anything to do directly with the disruptions themselves. I think the act of disruption for them, because all three of them are Special Ed., so sitting in one space quietly with 40 other children was a hard set up for them.
Julia relied on a type of scientific diagnosis of the students by alluding to studies that boys mature slower than girls and bringing up their categorization as students who have been diagnosed as requiring special education to assess the situation. She acknowledged that the structure of the class did not facilitate an easy learning environment for them. When speaking of gender, Greg equates the term with women and leaves men, gender neutral and other gender identities outside of his consideration:

**Greg:** I think the gender norms are very interesting because at times you see young women who are shut down by habits in the hood but also you could see women who take to that hyper-violence as well who adopt that culture of violence in order to survive. You sometimes see in fights that young women are sometimes the most brutal in terms of what they actually do in a fight and I think that’s also a survival mechanism because we know that young women are the most at-risk in the home and on the street so I feel that it breeds this culture of if I strike first, if I strike the hardest, then you know people will leave me alone, they know I’m not to be played with. So you see, I see those dynamics play out in the classroom and on the streets. Just walking you hear things and are aware and you’re just like wow. This is a person who is, who has been a victim and now has internalized that and is now acting the role of the oppressor because they don’t want to, they fear so much being oppressed they’re gonna take on the role of the oppressor.

Greg’s analysis focuses on the dangerous ways that he see’s young women partake in a culture of violence that is generally considered the domain of men and it is here that is concern lies. The shared racial identity between his students leads Chris to believe that race is not a factor until he as a non-racialized person is inserted into the mix.

**Chris:** As far as race, between students, I mean it’s not an issue. I think that, or it’s not an issue really ever, it’s not a factor. I think there’s definitely a dynamic with me as like a white educator and as a white emcee, you know we’ve had discussions about race and stuff like that and I’ll be like “Hey, what’s it like to have me in the room?” (laughs) because it’s like real and like I’ve gotten some weird responses just interesting responses. I’m not trying to judge the responses, they were just interesting.

Chris is aware that there is a racial dynamic at play with his own presence as a white educator and a white emcee but does not delve into what that dynamic is and how it mediates the power differentials between he as the instructor and them as the students.
Greg recognizes race as a dynamic and his analysis of it reveals an understanding of the way that gender and race intersect, even if he does not use the language to describe it as such:

**Greg:** I think race is a little easier to get into. I think being a man of color there are so many expectations of you in terms of how you’re supposed to react. I remember something very clearly when I was in high school, somebody said something about my mom and this kid, this white kid said “oh don’t speak about E’s mom because he’s Spanish and they don’t play that,” or something like that and I was just like wait, what am I supposed to like beat somebody up now? Is that what I gotta do? So I feel like that’s a very real thing. Young men at times they may not even want to react violently but they feel like they have to in order to save face. So there are these norms that are placed on specifically men of color as opposed to white men because you know we’re supposed to be gangsters, we’re supposed to come from the streets, we’re supposed to carry this bravado about us. But that’s not, that’s not reality and that’s what we, that’s what we’re getting at with the work we do with our young men, it’s that you define who you are and that those things that people say about you, what the news and the media portray you as, is fiction and you have the opportunity and the ability to redefine yourself.

Greg’s analysis illustrates how public perception of one’s identity and how expectations dictate its performance is an important consideration. Michael S. Kimmel notes in his article “Masculinity as Homophobia: Fear, Shame and Silence in the Construction of Gender Identity” men are constantly being evaluated and measured by each other: “We are under the constant careful scrutiny of other men. Other men watch us, rank us, grant our acceptance into the realm of manhood. Manhood is demonstrated for other men’s approval. It is other men who evaluate the performance.” (1997, p. 224)

Trevor provides a clear analysis of the way that race, gender and class intersects in his classroom:

**Trevor:** Constantly on the radar for me was identifying ways in which people were discriminated against within the school and constantly finding ways to counter that. And for me that’s a project of social justice. And that had a lot to do with racism, intersecting with sexism and intersecting with classism in terms of the ways that particular students that I would be working with were treated, were thought of, you know, responded to in the school environment.

Trevor’s analysis enables him to recognize the ways that his students may perform, resist, remix and transcend the expectations put on them. His analysis on the ways that race and
gender intersect is clearer in language but still echoes much of what was stated by Greg when he spoke of racism:

**Trevor:** I feel like as a Black male myself I’m very conscious of my identity right? And I can mobilize it in different spaces when I don’t like want people around me. I can play my, yeah, afraid of the Black male card you know what I mean? Or if I’m walking down the street or I’m in an elevator, whatever it is. So I can be conscious of that identity and mobilize it in different spaces. So I feel like even as a student, that particular student, who happened to be a Black male, was probably aware of what was threatening about him and how people would read him.

Trevor’s position as a Black male and reflection on that positionality provides him with a lens of analysis that does not seem to be shared by his colleagues. His understanding of the various ways that Black masculinity is read and can be strategically mobilized can be understood when one considers the markers of masculinity for Black males:

In their quest to embody the dominant form, men of subordinate status employ domination as a strategy themselves and may exhibit a range of identity management techniques, including “(1) being homophobic, (2) devaluing femininity, (3) increasing masculine bravado, and (4) claiming masculine space within the larger feminized area.” Black men’s performance of imposing coolness might easily utilize any of these four techniques, and in the case of commercially successful hip-hop performance, the first three (homophobia, devaluing femininity, and bravado) are crucial. (Jeffries, p. 58)

In the context of a middle school where many educators are white and female as was discussed earlier, their reading of Black male students in their classroom and the performance of these expectations by students creates a conflation of tension that can easily result in disruption, conflict and violence.

Kevin Kumashiro argues that students need to be taught a pedagogy of positionality in order to understand how they are affected not only by oppression but also by privilege.

I should note that the process of learning about the dynamics of oppression also involves learning about oneself. Students need to learn two things about themselves. One, that some of their identities and experiences may be those they are studying about, and thus, that they may be privileged in some ways. Two, that they (often unknowingly) are complicit with and even contribute to these forms of oppression when they participate in the privileging of certain identities. Thus, teachers should engage in a "pedagogy of positionality" that engages both students and teacher in recognizing and critiquing how one is positioned and how one positions others in social structures (2000, p. 37)
However the noted absence of this analysis on the part of the educators interviewed in this study (with the above exception of Trevor) leads me to believe that this is a gap in the consideration of these alternative educators. Their inability to have an understanding of how gender, race and class shape the perspectives, decisions and actions of their students, creates a notable gap in their ability to support these same students in developing a pedagogy of positionality. Hazel discussed how students are not always equipped with the tools to recognize situations of racism that they encounter on the everyday:

**Hazel:** The fact that anytime I’m doing a workshop with a diverse group of students, so racially diverse group of students plus like so we’ll say affluent and non-affluent, when I bring up the concept of race and racism and they say yes it happens but no it doesn’t happen in the school system, the example that I always use 100% of the time is: Corridor A there’s two Black boys fighting. Corridor B there’s two white boys fighting. Do they all get suspended? “No.” Do both their parents get called? “No.” Who get’s suspended? “The Black boys.” What happens to the White boys? “They get sent back to class.” So is this not racism? Like they can acknowledge the disparities that happen but they can’t acknowledge what it is that’s happening.

In a context where racism becomes an invisible and almost banal part of everyday life, it’s identification is harder to make: “It is entirely possible to be critical of racism at the level of ideology, politics and institutions…yet possess a great quality of common sense racism.” (Schick, et. al., 2003, p. 3) Hazel’s narrative can also be seen as an illustration of Henry Giroux’s argument that contemporary schooling does not prepare students to recognize injustice and perhaps discourages educators from identifying it also because it would require an implication of their own complicity:

As educational reform increasingly appropriates the values of fraud culture, many students go through public schooling and higher education unable to recognize injustice and unfairness, and often find themselves wedded to a notion of unattached individualism that cuts them off from any sense of moral and social responsibility to others or to a larger notion of the common good. (Giroux, 2010, p. 358)

When considering what is made visible and what is made invisible in the constitution of social problems, it is an interesting exercise in perspective to consider the public discourse that surrounds students who attend elite private/prep schools. Rubén Gaztambide-Fernández’ paper “Notes from Bullshit as Resistance: Justifying Unearned
Privilege Among Students at an Elite Boarding School” paints the picture of a very different educational experience:

Education at elite prep schools can be characterized with three words: expansive (because of the wide range of opportunities and resources provided); demanding (because of the high levels of achievement and hard work expected); and engaging (because of the constructivist theory of learning that underlies the teaching. (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2011 p. 581)

The same inequality that exists within classrooms and schools, can also be found between schools. The resources, opportunities and high expectations that characterize elite/prep schools illustrate the other side of the equation. Alongside the rigorous training also comes a hidden curriculum of cultural capital. Through learning the systems, conventions, cultural and linguistic codes, concepts, ideas, gestures, and speech of the dominant they are able to communicate and be intelligible to those who sit in the seats of power and influence that they will eventually take over:

Cultural capital differs from other forms of capital, such as economic and social, in that it functions as symbolic capital, or one whose acquisition is disguised, making it difficult to determine how one acquired it. In other words, cultural capital’s representation as symbolic capital often makes it seem like something “natural” about the individual who possesses it….Cultural capital is used to position people in a particular status hierarchy among their peers. Furthermore, it acts as a criterion for setting up boundaries and determining who is legitimate or authentic in a setting, excluding those that lack legitimacy. (Clay, 2003, p. 1349)

The rigorous training and high expectations that characterize these schools also provide a worthy backdrop of legitimacy (and a requisite sense of entitlement) for the success of these students. One of the Toronto interviewees recounted an experience where she had to deliver equity-based training to a group of high school leaders from a very affluent school in the city. In discussing the role of the school board to “ensure students have access financially to whatever’s going on in the schools” she received a large amount of resistance from the group of young people who argued that equity issues of this nature were not a worthy consideration for the school board. They proposed that the responsibility to provide certain students with breakfast and transportation support should not fall on the board but rather was solely the concern of the parents who had to “deal with the cards they’ve been dealt.” As a white woman who herself had grown up in a lower socio-economic background, the persistent resistance she experienced from the students began to frustrate her. Hazel told them: “…you’re all not understanding because
you’re from privilege. So you’ve never had to experience the life circumstances of having to live in a scenario where you have to even ask…how it feels to ask for the support” These students are situated early on with numerous tools and resources none of which support the sense of urgency held by the interviewer that these structures need to change:

We have noticed how reluctant students are to talk about race and racial identities; they would prefer instead to talk about cultural difference. This recasting of the discourse suggests that the problem resides with the other and her or his culture. Consequently, the emphasis on culture leaves the onus on the culturally different to fit in. The others are required to do a better job of explaining themselves, healing themselves, or abandoning their culture. The statement “The problem is that their values and beliefs are so different from ours” suggests that the others’ cultural values and beliefs – what constitutes difference – is the problem. Their culture, however it is conceived – as dysfunctional, inadequate, or too much – is what contributes to and explains their inequality. (Schick, et. al, 2003, p. 67)

Scheurich notes that this blindness can be conceived as another type of social problem that should be tackled but is rarely taken up in the field of educational policy or research:

it could reasonably be argued that the overwhelmingly white suburban schools (substantially born of white flight from people of colour) are training grounds for white supremacy, not in the South African or Fascist sense, but in the sense that the social order privileges whites and that suburban schools inscribe the white supremacy regularity within the subjectivity of their white students. Through such schools the social order is constituting its privileged members – how to behave and how to think. The social order will not construct this white suburban student group as a problem group; it will not label, describe, study and treat this group as a problem. It would be at odds with the regularity of white supremacy to identify this white group as a problem. (Scheurich, 1994, p. 308)

It has been argued by various educational researchers that discipline is approached quite differently in suburban and inner city schools:

Davis and Jordan (1994) found that high suspension rates occurred in schools where extensive amounts of time were spent on discipline-related matters. Similarly Kamps and her colleagues (1989) analyzed the statements teachers made to children in inner city and suburban first-grade classrooms. In the suburban classroom, the majority of the teacher statements revolved around academics. In the inner city classroom, however, teacher statements largely focused on management commands, resulting in fewer opportunities for academic response. (Townsend, 2000, p. 385-386)

Numerous educators brought up the importance of understanding the context of their students when addressing issues in the classroom. However how they understood and articulated this context differed significantly:
When asked how he dealt with behavioral issues in his classroom Derek said:

**Derek:** Sometimes I have to do one-on-one and I recognize that a lot of times it’s not the students’ fault. It’s not the student’s fault because our students have a lot of challenges so sometimes they live in group-homes or they’re just underserviced or they don’t have certain things, food, or other challenges that they were dealing with before they came in.

Derek’s response is careful not to blame the students but rather blames the circumstances of their lives (i.e. their socio-economic status) and the challenges that come along with them leading his analysis to teeter dangerously toward a culture of poverty thesis. Derek names class as a general mediating factor behind a violent incident that occurs at his school because most of the students are from a low socio-economic background:

**Derek:** I would say moreover yeah the class affects them because of…sometimes its issues of stability. Sometimes it’s hostility and violence or they’re not exposed to how to manage conflict or manage anger as much as students from maybe middle-class or upper class. Now sometimes that’s because of things like you know they don’t have as much adult attention because maybe single parent households or parents are working or parents are managing you know, raising siblings but that affects them a lot and yeah I guess it affects them all across the board but in terms of violence, I would say that affects them a lot because sometimes there’s been some hostility or there’s deep-rooted anger or deep-rooted feelings that haven’t been resolved, a lot of times. So the girl from my art class, she’s very sweet, most of them are sweet, but her, her mouth comes from, it comes from maybe sometimes anger or sometimes resentment because she doesn’t get enough attention. And her mother has communicated to the counselor that you know this particular girl is the problem child, you know, and she has to babysit a lot because her mother has a little infant.

The labeling of the student as a “problem child” shifts the focus from the school to the parent, providing a worthy context for her behavior that divorces the school or educator from any responsibility. Derek identifies the lack of resources that led to this behavior as a lack of not only material wealth but also an absence that models alternative strategies for addressing conflict.

Hazel advocates for the importance of communication with parents in order to develop a cultural consistency in behavioral strategies:
**Hazel:** So when the behavior happens at a young age, with the teacher who doesn’t understand those social dynamics and how to behaviorally modify the student then all of a sudden it’s this child needs special education. This child is a behavioral student whereas no, if you just spoke a little bit more firmly with that student or gave - asked their parent what types of discipline do you give this child at home so that I can make sure I’m on the same page as you, you would have seen a much different shift of behaviors from that student but instead 5, 6, 7, 8 year old child is now behavioral because they back-talked to a teacher. And now they’re labeled for the rest of their educational career.

Aligning strategies with those of the parent is something that Hazel advocates as a more constructive and positive option than the diagnosing/labeling of students. However this strategy assumes that the strategies of the parent are one’s that are healthy. Her strategy does align with notions of culturally relevant pedagogy that argues teachers should become “cultural brokers” (Gay as quoted in Townsend, 2000, p. 387) In order for teachers to understand their students socializing they need to become “more familiar with the social and cultural context of her students’ lives…it is a call for teachers to become better observers of the everyday lives of their students and re-examine their own values, beliefs, habits or ways of working with students.” (McCready, et. al, 2010, p. 117)

### 4.5 Authenticity and its Pedestal

As an educator who at the time of our interview did not teach a formal Hip Hop Education class but rather incorporated Hip Hop into all that she does, Toronto based teacher Kathy views the narratives and stories within rap music as an affirmation of her life experiences that is echoed in the validation she see’s the culture provide to her students. What they share in common is not necessarily the culture but the way that the culture has affirmed and informed their experiences, perspectives and life choices.

**Kathy:** For me it’s more about my life experience and the fact that so much of Hip Hop music speaks to my life experience, it also speaks to the life experiences of my youth so that we connect to not so much about the music but we connect about what the music is saying that we relate to. And for me that has always given me, personally what I feel is like a different type of authenticity as a teacher because of my life experience and I think that I’m a lot more in your face. I wear less of a professional mask as a result of being, just to be real, more ratchety than my colleagues and more shady and my friends are still shady and I’m still shady and we’re all still bunch of fucking
shady street kids so as a result I move differently and always have and probably always will. I get along better with some of my students, in terms of feeling understood by them than I do by most of my colleagues. Because most of my colleagues haven’t lived my life the same way that I have with my students.

Kathy’s narrative utilizes her experiences, in the context of Hip Hop Education, to create a badge of authenticity that distinguishes her from her colleagues. As in Hip Hop culture she values the capacity to be real, ratchety, shady and street, values that create distance between her and her colleagues but she argues enables her within the urban classroom to create a strong foundation of reciprocal trust and understanding with her students.

The divergence between the authenticity that makes one relevant and accessible to her students and simultaneously separate and distant from her colleagues is something that Toronto based educator Hazel also discussed. The pressure to wear what Kathy called “the professional mask” and the repercussions that come from refusing it create a rift between Hazel and her colleagues:

**Hazel:** I find because I stay authentic to myself regardless that’s not necessarily always looked on as a positive thing to people who are in my field, colleagues who are around me, my superiors. I think marginalized young people are always able to see me and appreciate that I’m able to portray that this is my authentic life story and they receive it because of the authenticity.

The connection that Hazel and Kathy have with their students is distinct from the relationships their colleagues have with students, however their articulation flirted with a particular kind of romanticism that silenced the reality that this relationship does not exist on an equal playing ground. The power of surveillance and the power to ascertain the meaning behind what is observed in such a way that can affect the lives of the observed marks a distinct space of power held by teachers and administrators that is not shared by students: “Teachers and school administrators have the power to place students under surveillance, evaluating their behavior and handing out social rewards based on their observations.” (Collins, 2009, p. 104) The power differential between students and teachers also plays out in the disciplinary sphere:

As in the wider society, those who are in positions of structural power in the school are least likely to have the harms that they produce criminalized. This might be obvious for the harms against teachers and students produced by school administrators, who have considerable autonomy in exercising power over school
personnel. Administrators are only rarely called to account for their harmful practices by school boards, and even then the harm is not seen as criminal but as “inappropriate action” or some other euphemism. Similarly, classroom action by teachers toward students is not criminalized as harm except in the most extreme cases, such as sexual predation or [overt] racial discrimination. But more serious and more pervasive are the subtle forms of institutionalized harm such as the disrespect by teachers toward students, labeling students as stupid or not amounting to anything, or the application by teachers and administrators of inconsistent disciplinary practices. Indeed, it is just such harm perpetrated by the structurally powerful in schools that is correlated with a high incidence of violence by students. (Henry, 2000, p. 24)

The word authenticity was used numerous times throughout the interviews as a distinct component and marker of Hip Hop education. New York based educator Greg uses it when he describes the type of resolution that his organization strives for when mediating conflict:

**Greg:** I think we strive to be as authentic as possible and so when students get into a conflict, for us it’s about whether they actually reach a resolution and not just fake hug or fake dap it up. And if they’re at the point where they cannot reach a resolution, to be real about that. And to say I’m too upset or I’m still mad and I need to think about it or I need a day or I need whatever but I think authenticity in the process is what’s most important to us because that gives us the fertile ground to then establish the peace. This person is being like 100, they can’t hug you right now, so give them a minute. You know tomorrow or next week, we’ll talk about it. The young people are, are the point of the process. Their perspective, them reaching the perspective of understanding and peace is the point of that process.

Greg describes a concept of justice that requires authentic understanding and an honest journey toward peace rather than the appearance of resolution. However there are dangers in this pedagogy that is rooted in the notion of authenticity. As Michael Jeffries notes:

Social authenticity, racial or otherwise, is dangerous territory. Groups cultivate cultural scripts, or “narratives that people use in shaping their life plans and in telling their life stories.” As certain narratives become increasingly robust, they grow into more than stories, becoming “truths” about the group in question and part of group members’ individual and social definition. A relatively small number of stories rise to prominence and are used as shortcuts to categorization and definition by both group insiders and outsiders. In many cases, these authenticity indicators enable a sense of pride and distinction along lines that challenge the understandings prescribed by social conditions or power relations. But the dark side of this phenomenon is that robust authenticity scripts can be restrictive resulting in the naturalization of social differences. Group members who do not fit scripted roles are often isolated from their social group, defined as suspects and deviants both by those within their collective and by onlookers who impart an “other-otherness” to such pariahs. (2011, p. 68)
The pressure to maintain authenticity may lead educators to rigidly form social identities that they deem relatable and connected to that of their students. This process of “keeping it real” may actually result in the opposite as the natural complexities of what makes up an individual cannot all be accepted under the banner of the authentic Hip Hop educator and it is this tension which was a silent presence in the interviews I conducted. This was most notably manifest in the silence of Julia, a woman of colour who grew up in a middle class household and did not identify with Hip Hop until much later in life. Since connecting to the culture she has dedicated much of her time to researching and learning sharing honestly with her students her desire to grow and understand. Although she is one of the co-founders of one of the most successful Hip Hop Education programs in the public school board, during our group interview she was silent for much of it and left most of the answering to Kathy and Hazel, two white women who are self-identified Hip Hop heads that she felt were more authentic voices than her own.

In the classroom critical Hip Hop educators have found subversive ways to utilize this cultural practice of placing authenticity on a pedestal. Greg shared an incident where one young man betrayed the trust of the group outside of the space and then was met with violence during programming by another student who slapped him at their next session:

**Greg:** So that was one of the few incidents that we’ve had to have the parental involvement because that young man was so just upset that he wanted retribution, he wanted to impose violence on that other young man. So we had that meeting. Then we had I think two other meetings with the two young men and had them talk it out. It didn’t end very happy go lucky where everybody was friends at the end, but what both parties did leave with was an understanding A) that you’re just never supposed to smack someone, you can’t be touching people and also that what is said in the circle is supposed to be sacred. You know, you’re not supposed to be out there saying whatever. And we’re just being real too because our conversation with the young man who was spreading information outside the circle was like, “Look dude whose gonna want to be your friend you know if you’re gonna be out here blabbing away or whatever. You’re in session.” And you know that young man was also, you know had delusions of like being a gangster and so it was also like on that level like dude, you know that’s a snitch right? You know just to be 100 with you. It’s just like you can’t have that reputation especially coming from the projects you know what I’m saying? So on a very you know base level you don’t want that and then on the higher level on what we’re trying to build you don’t want that! Once young people are able to understand that, we feel that our job is done and it takes time for them to understand that.
Greg demonstrates with this incident that the process of coming to a resolution was multifaceted and involved the inclusion of families. He does not create romantic illusions of peace but rather illustrates how raw understanding of the values of the individuals involved supported the process. Calling on the infamy of the snitch in Hip Hop culture, allowed him to reason with the young man involved on several different levels of relevance, helping him to understand the various consequences to his decisions. Although Hip Hop authenticity is often associated with a “hard” masculinity, Michael Jeffries complicates this into a more nuanced understanding that provides room for emotion and vulnerability but still creates delineated lines between what is and is not acceptable:

As hip-hop narrators engage nihilism, they speak about vulnerability, spirituality, and love among men, none of which are traditionally masculine topics that impart power to the narrator in the context of hegemonic masculinity. The barrier of authenticity is erected as a protective wall, keeping fake men out and preventing them from witnessing and empathizing with thug vulnerability. In erecting this barrier, thug narratives invert the value of painful lived experiences and hyperghetto social death. Trouble is transformed from a source of trauma to a badge of honor that earns thugs the right to be vulnerable, spiritual, and loving, as they simultaneously distance themselves from “weak” men who exhibit the same qualities. Tracing this process begins with confronting nihilism. (Jeffries, 2011, p. 93)

This particular socially acceptable vulnerability was tapped into during the incident described by Greg as they allowed one of the young men space to cry in his humiliation before addressing the ways that he had to understand his responsibility and accountability. These difficult conversations were articulated by nearly all interviewees as a necessary and integral part of any space dedicated to critical Hip Hop pedagogy.
Chapter 5
Autoethnographic Analysis

In this section I will connect some of the key themes that emerged through the field research with my own personal experiences as an educator in Critical Hip Hop Pedagogy. As noted in my Introductory Chapter, most of these experiences emerged during my time working as an Instructor and Facilitator for Lost Lyrics, an alternative education organization I co-founded and worked for from 2006-2012.

5.1 My Rebel Stance as a Hip Hop Educator

When Lost Lyrics began, the field of Hip Hop education in Toronto was relatively sparse and the knowledge of all that it could encompass was highly limited, even by those of us who were working towards its manifestation. However the groundwork for a Critical Hip Hop Pedagogy (CHHP) movement had been created by the growing success of organizations around us such as The Remix Project and Beats 2 Da Streets, the writing of Dalton Higgins and Wasun in the early millennium, programs such as Fresh Arts and the scholarly work of Rinaldo Walcott in the 1990’s and before that the existence of The Black Education Project in the 1970’s and 1980’s.

The ongoing battle to legitimize Hip Hop Education within the school system was one that I experienced only indirectly. I was not a certified teacher looking to include this curriculum in my classroom but I did work with teachers and administrators to determine ways that this pedagogy could exist in their schools. However this was only one of several battle arenas that we (Lost Lyrics) had to face in proving our legitimacy. The first arena, and one that was not mentioned by any of the interviewees and was not touched on in most of the literature I have encountered was the particular struggle of female identified Hip Hop educators. As women we were required to prove our legitimacy and authenticity in the world of Hip Hop. The assumption was made time and time again when we approached community centers, schools and community organizations that we were Hip Hop dancers because this was the only space that folks could imagine or understand us occupying. It was also assumed that we would be merely teaching young
people artistic skills: how to rap, how to breakdance, how to deejay, how to do graffiti. This latter assumption is one that was less mediated by gender and is a shared experience of Hip Hop educators across the board.

When we corrected assumptions with the explanation that we would be teaching critical thinking, social justice issues and engaging the entire culture of Hip Hop, people became confused, nervous and very often were also threatened. This was illustrated through interrogative questioning and the sudden arrival of bureaucratic roadblocks. As mentioned in the previous chapter, skepticism around Hip Hop education is often a mask for a larger fear of its potential as a site for critical conversation, imaginative creation and self-determined liberation. However the fear Lost Lyrics encountered was also instigated by people’s perception of the messengers for this pedagogy: the co-founders of Lost Lyrics. As a Black woman with Grenadian and Venezuelan heritage and a Brown woman of Tamil and Sri Lankan descent partnered in the project of Critical Hip Hop Pedagogy, we were confusing to the Hip Hop industry and educational system. We could not be easily categorized or classified and were therefore deemed unintelligible to many. Potential stakeholders – from funders to Hip Hop artists – were hesitant to provide us with a stamp of approval requiring varying forms of “evidence” to legitimize us (i.e., co-signs from male artists/colleagues, testimonials from satisfied students and their parents, site visits, etc.)

As a result, in the early years as we attempted to educate people on who we were and what we were doing, the sense of surveillance on our work was heightened. Whether this surveillance came from other educators, funders, the eyes of the library staff where our classrooms were housed or community programs that viewed us as competition, there was a sense in the first years that we had to prove and assert our legitimacy. As Smaller (1997) notes, since the inception of state schooling systems, teachers have “been subjects of regulation, supervision and control. This disciplining has emanated from a number of sources, ranging from inspectors and school trustees to parents and even students.” (p. 97) Thinking back now I can see how this surveillance served as a form of indirect disciplining on how I may have dealt with issues of conflict in my classroom. As a young
woman constantly challenged on my ability to “know” Hip Hop, I felt a strong need to exert myself as an authoritative voice. Proving myself meant demonstrating not only knowledge but also a particular kind of strength, confidence and presence that was more often than not a performance as opposed to a natural state of being.

The Lost Lyrics staffing team has always been made up of young, creative and racialized people who were closely connected to the culture of Hip Hop. As a result we did not have to directly grapple with the challenges that can emerge when a white teaching force attempts to understand, engage and utilize critical Hip Hop pedagogy. What we have struggled with though are the distinctions that existed between the class bracket of some staff members and our students and the differences of understanding that emerge when educators do not comprehend those realities. The assumption that students have more options available to them than is actually the case would create awkward and tense moments that highlighted the need for on-going education and understanding of the teaching force. However an even more challenging dilemma, and one that was not articulated by any of the participants in the research was when our staff or hired contractors related completely to the class reality. Although it was a generally positive attribute that contributed to their ability to connect with students, there were moments when these individuals became trapped in a mentality that defined this reality of working-class poverty and struggle as the only one that could be considered authentic, real and possible. In doing so, they created a glass ceiling on themselves and the students. The Hip Hop worldview that built our capacity to recognize, connect, create and evaluate also had a dangerous capacity to essentialize. Authenticity was placed on a pedestal and narrow parameters informed the boundaries of the classroom. The “ghetto” in Hip Hop culture can easily become a romanticized space, just as dangerous as the stereotypes that categorize it as a site of crime, bereft of promise.

It was in Hip Hop’s acceptance of the contradictory, the complex and the nuanced that we attempted to situate ourselves and locate the engine of our pedagogy. We aimed to strike a balance between recognition and respect for our students’ and staff’s lived experiences while nurturing a willingness to challenge and imagine beyond what we immediately
know and see. This was something that came up numerous times in our staff meetings and led to a lot of internal training, learning and very difficult conversations. It meant that some folks realized this was not the space for them whereas other members of our staff team stayed and grew with the organization.

The folks that stayed with Lost Lyrics all shared the same spirit of rebellion identified in the Hip Hop educators interviewed for this study. As an organization we did not fit comfortably in any of the communities that we occupied: the non-profit world, the education world, the Hip Hop industry or the activist world. Borrowing from each but not settling in any way we reveled in our role as outsiders and attracted students who felt similarly.

5.2 The Lost Lyrics Classroom

Similarly to the methods used by the educators interviewed for this study, the Lost Lyrics classroom always begins in a circle. The cipher holds a sacred space in our pedagogy and the notion of each voice being important is critical. Each Lost Lyrics class begins with a check-in and check-out, with these moments of sharing sometimes dominating the programming time. During these check-ins and check-outs each student shared how they were doing and how they felt about the class. Distinct from the repetition and routines and outcome driven imperatives that drive most schools, check-ins and check-outs were viewed as classroom rituals. This activity was often the only opportunity in a students’ day where they were able to share what was going on in their lives and how they were feeling without interruption and with an audience that listened intently. As an instructor, it was a challenge to balance this organic need to share with the aims and goals of the curriculum. I quickly realized that I had to learn to let go of these expectations and realize that what my students might need most urgently in that moment was not a lesson but a chance to breathe, share, reflect and be affirmed in their experiences.

These check-ins and check-outs also created normalizing principles of governance for Lost Lyrics. Every student knew without a doubt that not only their voice, but also their
perspectives and stories had value, merit and a space within the classroom. Indeed it is a hallmark of critical pedagogy that the potential for the individual to come into their voice be created and space is made for those often not authorized to speak. (hooks, p.185) Each session the relationships between students and their understanding of each other grew as they exercised the patience to sit, listen and sometimes respond to what each person brought into the space. I regret now not using that model more effectively when issues of conflict and violence occurred in the classroom because I recognize how rooted our students were in this collective model. Each time one of them brought a new friend into the space they eagerly told them about check-ins and check-outs and schooled them on what to expect with an enthusiasm that illustrated how invested they were in this practice.

As an organization that always worked in the confines of borrowed programming space, we never had the opportunity to physically create our own classrooms in design and decoration. The absence of this made the people that occupied the space that much more important as we realized that it was energy, content, style and activities that made a Lost Lyrics space identifiable. Creating consistent rituals that did not shift with the location provided our students with a sense of stability and understanding in the absence of a physical structure they could call home. As a facilitator it also anchored and defined the principles of our pedagogy – we began and ended with the stories, feelings and perspectives of our students and quickly realized that this was the core of our teaching. My lessons on social justice issues were easily connected to their experiences because I knew what those experiences were and could draw on them providing the linkages needed for them to understand and connect.

5.3 Lost Lyrics Classroom Culture

It was early in my teaching career that I got called out by my students. Here I was encouraging them to write, to rap, to sing, to dance, to paint, to photograph, to create, to share…but what did I do? It was a legitimate and fair question that I attempted to dodge and duck for some time before I finally did what I had been asking them to do; I gathered my courage and entered into the freestyle cipher. That was one of the many moments
where I became the student in the classroom and learned more from them than they did from me. From that day, the dynamics of the classroom changed and the trust deepened. As a Hip Hop educator who is not a Hip Hop practitioner/artist there is a particular kind of vulnerability and need for courage that emerges with the position. It surprised me that none of the interviewees who are non-practitioners brought this fact up. Creating a safe space in Hip Hop education requires a degree of authenticity that see’s the educator meet their students halfway. In doing so we are able to create a playing field that although still mediated by very present power dynamics is somewhat leveled out in the courage that is asked of each individual engaged in the space.

The ongoing creation of a safe space was constantly disrupted, particularly in the Lost Lyrics Blueprint After-School Program where it was not mandatory attendance and students often brought friends and siblings with them, changing the energy and dynamics each week. The rituals and principles of Lost Lyrics helped to create a classroom culture but this did not stop it from being an ongoing journey of creation and recreation. In the absence of a permanent physical structure, we had to get students invested in the idea of Lost Lyrics and the culture of the organization, a culture that they helped to co-create. Students and staff collectively wrote a pledge for the organization. Students wrote songs and poems about Lost Lyrics. We held an annual showcase of our students’ work entitled The Live Report Card for community members and stakeholders. Students represented the organization during television interviews, on panels and at gallery exhibits. In running our programs every year for several years, students were able to leave and come back recognizing that there was always a space for them with Lost Lyrics. As they got older, students were hired as interns to learn how to market and document the organization and also learn how to facilitate workshops and design curriculum. The investment level of our students was beyond anything we had ever imagined it would be.

In affirming their experiences, our students left Lost Lyrics feeling as though their voices mattered not only within the organization but also out in the world. However there was a danger in simply affirming experience without any opportunity to challenge that experience or imagine beyond it. In our Original Griots program with our older students
we recognized that the check-in’s were a necessity for these 15-18 year olds who were going through incredible life challenges. We also realized that alongside their experiences we had to create learning moments that disrupted what they already knew and explore the possibility of seeing the world differently. This balance was a challenge but a necessity so that our students could also realize possibilities within themselves that they had not before. Although the voices, stories and experiences of our students were the core of our pedagogy, it was the responsibility of us as educators to facilitate activities and introduce them to content and resources that would connect those experiences to larger themes, issues and strategies so that students would leave the classroom better equipped to face the outside world and transform it in powerful and critical ways.

5.4 Conflict within the Classroom

In high school my drama teacher would lock students in the costume closet when they would not “behave.” When I began my teaching career it was memories such as these, memories of the things I would not do that informed my decisions, but I had little example of what I should do. This was true of every aspect of teaching, but the most challenging moments, the moments where I really wished I had a reservoir of case studies and examples to pull from, were the moments of conflict and violence.

In my early years, there was a student in my after-school program whose energy was so large that it took over the entire space. I remember he spent 10 minutes on the floor chasing his imaginary tail and I had no idea what to do. There was a student whose energy was so negative that it seemed every time she came into the classroom she would bring with her a grey cloud. No matter what I tried to do and the various ways I tried to engage her and get her excited about learning, she would always look at me with the same bored and dispirited energy. I remember wishing that both of these students would not show up on certain days. I remember being constantly baffled that they would both keep coming, wondering why and not realizing until much later that their consistent attendance to a voluntary program was in itself a message that they were sending to me.
The first fight to break out in my class was between two girls who were in grade 6. They lived in the same neighbourhood, went to the same school and were in the same class and so they came into the program each week with a deep history ripe with love, resentment, hurt, insecurities and tension that was more complex than I could ever fully comprehend. The conflict began as a teasing exchange that graduated into an argument and then morphed into a fight witnessed by the entire class and eventually separated by me. I remember taking the fight personally. I was personally upset that they had disrupted the space, personally angered that they had stopped listening to me well before the argument escalated into a fight and personally embarrassed that I didn’t know what to do. I publicly disciplined them not because it was a consciously thought out strategy that I had selected after considering various options, but because I wanted revenge for the ways that I had felt personally humiliated in that moment. Years of experience later, I realize my fault and the dangers of this strategy. Both students continued attending the program but one of them refused to speak for the next month, sitting sullenly through each activity and refusing to respond when I attempted to connect with her one-on-one. I had not only failed to separate the offense and the offender but also the offense from my own self-centered understanding of the conflict.

The emotional impact of these moments was quite intense. I noted in Chapter 2 that this research is not only intellectual work but also emotional and spiritual because it is critical and transformative. I conducted my work as an educator from the same standpoint of personal vulnerability and collective urgency. As someone working from a place of passion rather than profession, my students saw many of these emotions and got to know me as a layered, complex and growing individual who didn’t have all of the answers. The one’s that stayed over several years saw me make the wrong decision more than once and acknowledge the times where I got it wrong. The death of one of my former students in 2013 brought an intensity of remorse that I have never felt before as I recalled the way that I had emotionally dealt with his bullying of a younger student. When I learned he and a friend had attacked a younger student in a bathroom with a wire hanger while I was organizing snacks for the class, I felt personally betrayed and sickened. I didn’t give him a chance to share his side of the story. I publicly reprimanded him and told him to leave.
That student left the program robbed of his voice. Several years later he was murdered and it was at that time that I learned he had never finished grade 8.

On the opposite end of the spectrum are the students who I wondered if I had given too many chances too. There was a student who took up exorbitant amounts of space in the program, was constantly getting into conflicts and in one scenario sexually assaulted another student. We asked him to leave at that time but a year and a half later after he had sought counseling and made amends with the other student and her family, he was allowed to rejoin. I wondered if there was a danger in the opposite of zero tolerance. Is there such a thing as too many chances? In the context of a society that gives so few chances to people who look like the students I taught in Lost Lyrics, my answer was no and still is no. In the context of the school to prison pipeline and the understanding of what potentially awaits them if we decide that we’ve had enough, my answer is no. In the context of an organizational memory of the time I did ask a student to leave and what ended up being his fate, I have decided no. Expulsion has not yet been part of the boundaries that we set and I do not know that it will ever be; for better or for worse.

5.5 Anti-Oppression, Intersectionality and the Classroom

As a Political Science Major and Women’s Studies Minor who hosted my own news show on a community radio station, had participated in marches for Haiti following the 2005 coup and had worked at the Centre for Women and Trans People at York University and for the Student Union, when I became an educator I was very cognizant that race, class, sexuality and gender were constant mediating factors in the classroom. It could be argued that I was almost too aware and that this focus on these intersecting and interlocking dynamics may have played such a large role in my analysis of incidents that it denied any individual accountability. In Lost Lyrics staff meetings we debated these very matters. Due to our relatively extensive knowledge of our students’ lives as a result of their check-ins and our constant awareness of the ways oppression impacted and shaped their lives, we would go back and forth on how to deal with students, rarely settling on a an organizational wide catch-all policy and rather dealing with each incident separately and distinctly.
We also attempted to pass this critical lens to our students with varying levels of success. In our longer-term programming we were able to share a lot, however in the spaces that we came into for workshops or short-term programs at schools, it was challenging to create space for these conversations. Although racialized, many students did not know what racism was. It became evident that knowledge of oppression and the ability to identify it and the language to name it was its own marker of cultural capital. In some schools, students were silent or uncertain about the way that oppression lived within their day-to-day interactions. Or, as was the case in on school, the charge of racism had become a tool constantly utilized by students whenever they got in trouble, thereby distilling it of any meaning or power. Teachers who spoke to me rolled their eyes at the word because it had been thrown in their faces so many times that it became dismissable, a joke, a rebuttal to any discipline they attempted to enact. This lack of understanding was scary and its results terrifying for in the blindness to its presence or the overuse of its reality, a mask was developed to conceal an overwhelmingly racist culture that discursively permeated day-to-day interactions and relationships within the school. In a one-hour workshop or bi-weekly programs that were supervised by classroom teachers, our capacity to engage these issues was highly limited and powerfully monitored.

Although on numerous levels the work that I did as an educator of Critical Hip Hop Pedagogy was undoubtedly transformative, I recognize there were limits. A critical moment where this was illustrated occurred when on a class a trip, a male student assaulted a female student. Many in the class witnessed this incident of violence and violation. Without notifying me or any of the other Lost Lyrics staff of what had occurred, the students decided to hold their own “trial” of the individual, complete with witnesses who chose to utilize their opportunity on the stand to speak not only about the incident in question but also about the character of the accused and any outstanding issues they had with him. This trial and the incident also sparked many triggers for several students and I realized later that the accused was also receiving anger that had been reserved for other individuals in their lives that would never face a trial for their actions. This scenario was a perfect example of the lateral way that power can be
strategically deployed. In this moment, the students that were “innocent witnesses” temporarily grasped the reigns of power and enacted judgment. The accused was not given a chance to speak and a majority vote was passed deciding that he would not return to the program.

When my colleague and I learned of the incident and the subsequent actions that had been taken by the students we attempted to intervene in two ways. We explained the legal implications of the incident and the steps that could be taken via the criminal justice system (a route that was promptly decried by the students and declined by the victim of the incident and her family as a result of their negative experiences with police and the court system). The second route that we encouraged was a more restorative process of addressing the incident. We attempted to encourage the voices of everyone involved to collectively explore the harm that had occurred, the reasons behind it and the repair that could be offered. However the students were silent, sullen and resistant. They were not interested in exploring an alternative way. They refused this process because they could not recognize where the necessary punishment would be found and also believed that justice had already been meted out. Interestingly the only one’s who were interested in participating in the restorative process were the two individuals who were directly involved in the incident and the pressure from the group eventually wore them both down from their initial willingness and interest. We realized then that although these were students who had been with us for years and had learned about social justice and anti-oppression, they were still deeply invested in a concept of justice that had to be retributive in order for it to be legitimate. Despite decrying the possibility of going to the police, without state intervention these students on their own reproduced a system of justice that had disturbingly similar hallmarks to the court system.
Chapter 6
Discussion and Final Thoughts

Before embarking on this chapter, I want to revisit some of the thoughts that were introduced in Chapter Two’s exploration of the discursive framework for this study. It has been challenging to embark on a narrative study without slipping into the tendency warned by Rinaldo Walcott of many sociologists who “organize world events as individuated projects in which people can take responsibility for individual problems.” (2006, p. 66) As I listened to the stories of these educators and reflected on my own experiences I automatically began thinking of the ways that we could do this work differently in order to create more fundamental and transformative impact on students. Although I do not want to be trapped by an analysis that considers things on a case-by-case basis, I am also not interested in producing a study filled with questions positioned only to deconstruct and offering little to those currently doing this urgent and critical work.

The fight to legitimize Hip Hop culture within the school system has created a rebel stance in every participant interviewed. As something that is not automatically understood or accepted by colleagues, administrators or curriculum development bodies, these teachers in various ways began their journey in Critical Hip Hop Pedagogy fighting. Recognizing that on varying levels the project of education occurs under surveillance, the actions, decisions and choices of those interviewed and of myself occur within this cognitive reality. The two educators from New York had less of an uphill battle relative to the educators in Toronto because of the deep rooted history Hip Hop culture has in the city and the longer fight for it’s inclusion in the education system. As a result, these educators were no longer as concerned with its basic inclusion but rather were focused on the specificities of that inclusion. For me, the rebel stance was also adopted from the start of my journey in CHHP because from inception I had to explain, legitimize and justify not only the content but also myself as an educator without certification, a Hip Hop representative without a penis and a critical pedagogue who utilized a contentious art form as the primary medium of engagement.
This rebel stance occupied by almost all of those interviewed was not only informed by external antagonisms but also from internalized beliefs of what makes Hip Hop culture authentic. Although these educators are fighting for its inclusion within the school system, many of them took pride in the fact that their knowledge, understanding and connection to the culture came not from an institution but from the streets. Graduating from the university of Hard Knocks, life experience was worn as a badge of authenticity that distinguished them for their colleagues. This desire to be distinct from yet also included within the school system creates an unresolved tension that some may argue has been present within Hip Hop culture since its emergence into the mainstream in the 1980’s. Similarly to the uneasy inclusion of b-boys in Hollywood films (think Rocksteady crew in Flashdance) and graffiti artists in high-brow galleries, the inclusion of Hip Hop within the education system is ripe with the tension between exposure, opportunity and the danger of co-optation. This has resulted in a determination on the part of the educator to be the embodiment and representation of authenticity. As the embodiment of authenticity, these educators also become subject to the external projections of all that is exciting, dangerous, appealing and fearful of Hip Hop within the school system. As individuals employed by educational institutions that have markedly different priorities, this is a tricky position to play. For those not working in schools, there were often other stakeholders such as funders from foundations and government bodies with whom one would have to negotiate a similar dance. As such a dual identity is balanced as the rebel educator – the authentic Hip Hop representative for one’s students must be able to fluidly transition into the flexible salesperson who speaks the language necessary for legitimation.

So why bother at all? Why risk all of this cognitive dissonance and professional uncertainty for this pedagogical practice? Why step into this space of experimentation, danger and risk? It quickly became clear that it is the relationships with students that grounds these teachers in the classroom and pushes them to continue. When coding the transcripts from the interviews, there were several words that came up repeatedly. Words such as “communication” and “relationship” were used numerous times by everyone interviewed. Other key terms that were used by all participants on numerous occasions...
were “culture,” “potential,” “understand” and “respect.” Each of these words can be seen as tenets for strong relationship building. In stark contrast only one participant used the term “deficit” although as was noted in Chapter 1, this term is utilized frequently in educational research and educational policy. These patterns in vocabulary illustrate the areas that these educators reflect on and emphasize in their pedagogy.

Beyond the way that educators feel about their students, there is also a shared paradigmatic framework that connects them. A core finding that has emerged through the analysis of the data gathered for this research is the existence of a particular Hip Hop worldview. This worldview shapes the response of educators not only to the content that they teach but also to issues of conflict, violence, disruption and disorder in the classroom. This worldview when connected with a lens of critical pedagogy enables educators to engage in practices that challenge the normative processes of the retributive justice paradigm the Canadian criminal justice system is currently rooted in. In many ways the strategies utilized by the educators interviewed echo the practices that are endorsed by advocates of restorative justice.

It should be noted that throughout the interview process, none of the participants directly mentioned or alluded to a connection with restorative justice paradigms or practices. However their love of Hip Hop culture and commitment to flip the script in their classrooms with the inclusion of Critical Hip Hop Pedagogy resulted in a somewhat outsider position within the school system that allowed them to think beyond institutional parameters and practices. In my own practice I began teaching with no knowledge of restorative justice and learned of it after I had already been teaching for several years. The revelation of it as a practice occurred simultaneously with a realization that I had already been engaging in some of its core principles and practices without the requisite naming or full recognition of their potential. Although powerful in some ways to realize that I was already doing the work without conscious awareness, the absence of this knowledge curtailed the effectiveness of my practices.
The absence of a conscious and direct connection between CHHP and restorative justice meant that my practices and the practices of the educators interviewed were haphazard, inconsistent and contextual, thereby providing little possibility for transformative change on an individual, collective or systemic level. Instead our approaches can be seen as experiments or tiny taste tests that students had a chance to sample before going back to their regularly scheduled programming. As was illustrated in the example of my students who refused to engage in a restorative justice practice, I had not been purposefully strategic in laying the groundwork through everyday classroom practices that would enable them to trust and invest in a restorative understanding of justice when the space was disrupted by violence. I say this while acknowledging that through critical pedagogy I understand that the violence of oppression and its resultant inequality is perpetuated “from generation to generation of oppressors who become its heirs and are shaped in its climate.” (Freire, 1970, p. 58) It would be ridiculous to believe that a weekly program could completely overtake this legacy. However, I do believe it could disrupt it, unsettle it, creak cracks in what had been deemed normal and provide a glimpse into the possibility of something different. This example highlights to me that although those students may have gained many valuable insights during their time in the program, they did not leave with a transformed notion of justice and remain invested in an understanding that is inextricably linked to notions of retribution, punishment and exclusion.

Although committed to creating alternative spaces of learning through Critical Hip Hop Pedagogy, the overwhelming focus on content as the root of that alternative has led to limited conscious thought, collective strategizing, coordinated practice and critical reflection on how this approach also can inform how educators deal with behavioral management. This absence helps to explain the discursive space between CHHP educator Derek who still relies heavily on exclusionary measures such as suspension and Trevor who on the opposite end of the spectrum believes that excluding students creates an irreversible break of trust in the classroom.
Understanding the lived experiences and context of the students in one’s classroom was brought up by nearly all of the participants as a critical component to creating a healthy learning environment. However that context was sometimes simplistically borrowed rather than critically considered. This was the case when Julia utilized the learning styles of her students and their categorization as Special Education students as justification for asking them to leave her class when she found them disruptive. A Hip Hop worldview includes the culture’s acceptance and encouragement of the contradictory, the complex and the nuanced and resists the simplistic assignment of categories, labels and classifications.

Although there was a moment in rap’s musical history where cultural critics attempted to draw lines of separation between so-called conscious and gangsta rap, these attempts to categorize were quickly recognized as futile. In a single rap album there can be a number of seemingly contradictory songs. For example there is often the requisite party song (often rife with misogyny) that occurs right before the deeply vulnerable song about a fallen homie, a newborn child or an absent parent. This song can come smack in the middle of two tracks glorifying life as a pimp/hustler/drug dealer and then all of this can be rounded out with a scathing critique on the racism of the system. Sometimes all of this content can be found in a single song. All of these approaches can co-exist without a rap artist being called a hypocrite because together they make up the nuanced and complex perspectives of a human being who is creating art based on the nuances of their experiences rather than catering to a particular branded and boxed in identity.

For educators invested and interested in CHHP it becomes vital that they are in a constant process of considering the various perspectives, experiences and contexts of their students recognizing that although a student may be disruptive that this behavior is not definitive of what they can contribute to the class. Constantly reminding oneself that this work is urgent and the politics behind that urgency also help to widen the contextual lens the educator should be considering. The student that is the most disruptive on one day may have the most to offer on another, particularly if that student realizes that they are not expected to perform within the confines of the categories they have been branded with. It is also important for these educators to consider the lessons they impart when
acquiescence and obedience are constantly rewarded and noncompliance punished. Although I recognize the need for learning spaces that are not constantly being disrespected by disruption, the move to silence that disruption through exclusion is a not only a dangerous lesson on the inevitability of power under the banner of a cultural form that emerged as an uninvited disruption and resistance to the systemic silencing of particular voices.

It is my assertion that this acceptance of nuance and complexity is the single most critical component that can serve to transform the ways that issues of conflict are addressed in the classroom and subsequently how students come to understand justice as a practice and process as well as a result. Combined with the principles of the cipher, where every participant in the space is given equal opportunity to have their voice heard, this paradigm of nuance and complexity has powerful implications in challenging the ways that justice is explored within the classroom.

Since its inception, Hip Hop culture has made strong claims to space; from the graffiti tags of NYC subway cars, to the block parties thrown by DJ Kool Herc and the incessant need of all rappers to rep their hood. The claim and cultural ownership of space is an interesting element to consider when exploring the possibility of a Hip Hop worldview in Critical Hip Hop Pedagogy. The classroom as a space that belongs to the educator and is shaped by the educator and their students becomes a powerful point of consideration for the creation of a cultural cornerstone within an institution that is informed by so many external considerations. Even for those of us who work in mobile classroom settings the creation of principles and practices that define the space can still create a powerful site for transformative learning experiences. Six of the eight educators interviewed discussed the importance of being proactive when addressing conflict and their strategies for doing so almost always centered on the creation of a space where students could feel safe, comfortable and respected. This space became the foundation for a process of justice that could mitigate or resolve any conflicts that emerged through a classroom culture rooted in a process of accountability balanced between individual and collective responsibility.
Accountability and handling one’s own business are key components of Hip Hop culture. The practice of battling is rooted in this notion that one must represent for themselves why it is that they are worthy of respect. Hip Hop culture is not one that is invested in the superhero complex of waiting for someone else to come in and save the day but rather calls for the ability to hold your own and stand up for yourself. In a Hip Hop Worldview then, educators who send challenging students out to be disciplined by an external body such as the administration may be seen as educators who don’t have it what it takes to handle their own business.

The conversation around accountability also implicates the students themselves. The School of Hard Knocks gives respect not to those who have had life handed to them on a silver platter of privilege but rather to those who have struggled, persevered and emerged battered, bruised and strengthened from experience. In an attempt to stay true to what Hurtado named as “an existentialist position of deconstructing by constructing.” (1996, p. 218) I offer the following thought: Connecting this privileging of experience with the importance of individual accountability can be a powerful cornerstone of Critical Hip Hop Pedagogy. Authenticity – one of the most celebrated principles of Hip Hop culture – in this reimagining of justice through CHHP - becomes equated with and inextricably connected to the capacity to be accountable to the individual and the collective while recognizing that one’s actions are mediated by the current historical moment. What notions of justice would students have if these principles were the one’s that shaped how incidents of conflict, violence and disruption were addressed in the classroom?

This thesis was an important but incredibly difficult project for me to work on and complete. There is so much to say about this topic that I see it as part of a larger developing project that I am merely contributing to. Central to this project is the question that I am not yet able to answer: what is the conception of justice students are being taught everyday in the classroom? The strategies utilized by some of the educators in this study illustrate the potential for creative and alternative ways of creating a classroom community that is able to introduce students to restorative ways of addressing conflict and violence. However the lack of training, resources, community support, consistent
documentation, reflexive practice and structure in the field of Critical Hip Hop Pedagogy has left many of these educators, including myself, working in isolated bubbles, developing strategy through experimentation.

I would now like to consider how this thesis paper can be extended beyond the limits of these pages.

6.1 Implications for Theory

The research conducted for this thesis relied heavily on the experiences of educators and in doing so it teetered dangerously into a case-by-case analysis; a favoured norm of the social work field. However I attempted to transcend the tendency to focus on the individual responsibility of the educators interviewed, including myself, and consider the larger transformative potential of this pedagogy. I believe there is further need to explore the possibilities inherent in the way justice is conceived and creatively engaged through Critical Hip Hop Pedagogy.

This work was guided by Critical Hip Hop Pedagogy, not only through the participation of educators who utilize it in their classrooms but also through the discursive framework that informed my research process. However in focusing on the experiences of teachers, I did not include the participation of students in this research in the ways called for by A. A. Akom (2009, p. 56). I believe that expanding this analysis to also center the participation of educators who work and move as rebels in their field is a proposition that would deepen the discursive nuances of this burgeoning scholarship.

6.2 Future Areas of Research

As acknowledged at the start of my thesis, the scope of this research due to capacity and resources has been highly limited. Below are some areas that I recommend be considered for future research:
1. An ethnographic study that centers the experiences of students in Critical Hip Hop Pedagogy classrooms
2. Research that moves away from individual experience as the primary basis of evidence (ex. A quantitative study examining the number of times students enrolled in classrooms that use Critical Hip Hop Pedagogy are suspended or expelled)
3. A survey of CHHP educators across North America on the various strategies they use to address conflict, violence disruption and disorder in their classrooms
4. An ethnographic study on a controlled sample test group of CHHP educators that are trained in restorative justice practices
5. A study that moves beyond the urban classroom to educational spaces in the suburbs and rural areas

6.3 Final Thoughts: “Build Your Own Pyramids, Write Your Own Hieroglyphs

This thesis does not provide a definite roadmap toward the correct or right way of creating an educational space of radical and critical pedagogical potential. However it opens the blinds to an awareness of the current landscape encourages a reflective experimentation and calls for the courage to push past the rigid parameters and begin building transformative spaces of learning for communities that are hungry for fundamental change

The title of this section comes from Compton-based rapper Kendrick Lamar’s soul stirring song Hiii Power. He calls on individuals to emerge from the systems of thought that have kept us entrapped (“Get up off those slave ships”) and to begin innovating, imagining and creating new ways of being (“and build your own pyramids, write your own hieroglyphs”). Education as a reproduction of dangerous social norms must be challenged, the myths of liberal democracy need to be exposed and constructing education as a platform for liberatory pedagogies of social change needs to be prioritized. Within this framework of thought we can reimagine social relations that denaturalize disciplinary punishment as a norm of schooling and call on experience, imagination and critical knowledge.

Reimagining education is one of the most fundamental steps to disrupting the reproductive processes of power that naturalize the marginalization and regulation of
bodies and communities that challenge, disrupt or subvert the social order. In this way we can begin to respond to Kendrick Lamar’s call to build our own pyramids and write our own hieroglyphs.
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Appendix A

For this research I conducted interviews with 8 individuals: 2 from New York and the remaining 6 from Toronto. As a result of logistical challenges, the interviews occurred through a variety of mediums, a fact that I am sure impacted the comfortability of the participants and their resulting responses. Below is a brief breakdown of how I engaged each participant. Pseudonyms are used for each person:

**Derek:** Derek is a Black male high school educator teaching in a small alternative school in Toronto. Derek is also a Hip Hop practitioner who has some experience in deejaying and production. At the time I conducted the interview he had run several Hip Hop education programs with his students and incorporated Hip Hop education into his classes in a variety of ways. Derek and I had previously met but knew very little of each other prior to this interview. We conducted an in-person one-on-one interview on my school campus.

**Chris:** Chris is a white male high school educator in New York who runs a counseling program that utilized Hip Hop culture and Hip Hop education. Chris is also a rapper. The interview was the first time we had ever met. The interview was one-on-one via Skype.

**Greg:** Greg is a Latino male that teaches a variety of Hip Hop education programs through non-profit organizations based in New York City. Some of the programs occur in high schools and others in community spaces. Greg is also a rapper and spoken word artists. The interview was the first time we had ever met. It was one-on-one and conducted via Skype.

**Trevor:** Trevor is a Black male middle school educator in Toronto who had utilized Hip Hop education in his classes and attempted to incorporate the pedagogy in various ways throughout his school. At the time of the research he was working on projects to incorporate it into various schools in Toronto. Trevor is also a rapper. We have worked together numerous times in the past. The interview was conducted one-on-one via the telephone.

**Hazel:** Hazel is a white female staff for a school board in the Greater Toronto Area and utilizes Hip Hop Education in a number of workshops and programs that she conducts at various schools. We have worked together numerous times in the past. The interview was conducted as an in-person group interview with Julia and Kathy.

**Kathy:** Kathy is a white female high school teacher in Toronto. Alongside Julia she has helped to create and conduct Hip Hop education programs in her school. We have
worked together numerous times in the past. The interview was conducted as an in-person group interview with Hazel and Julia.

**Julia:** Julia is a South Asian female high school teacher in Toronto. Alongside Kathy she has helped to create and conduct Hip Hop education programs in her school. We have worked together numerous times in the past. The interview was conducted as an in-person group interview with Hazel and Kathy.

**Theresa:** Theresa is an East Asian female teaches a variety of Hip Hop education programs through non-profit organizations and as a contracted arts educator in Toronto. Some of the programs occur in elementary, middle and high schools and others in community spaces. Theresa is also a poet, rapper, singer and visual artist. We have worked together numerous times in the past. The interview was conducted one-on-one via Skype.