The Kids Need Hip-Hop:

Reengaging Students through Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

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Abstract

My thesis advocates for critically-conscious hip-hop in classrooms to promote student engagement and culturally relevant pedagogical practices. This proposed approach to educating youth offsets the harmful effects of a normalized curriculum that limits students' creativity and discounts their experiences as lifelong learners. My thesis gathers data from research literature on hip-hop and education, critically-conscious hip-hop lyrics, and also includes my own hip-hop muse to illustrate the positive tenets of critically-conscious hip-hop. The research literature in my thesis is gathered from multiple studies within North American high schools. My hip-hop muse interrelates with critically-conscious hip-hop lyrics because they both address contemporary issues through social commentary and critical awareness. The element of social commentary in my hip-hop muse is displayed through short poems and verses that outline my experiences in a normalized schooling environment. Throughout my thesis, I uncover the causes of student disengagement in classrooms, the ways in which critically-conscious hip-hop music serves as a tool for reengaging youth, and the approaches that must be taken in order to adequately integrate hip-hop into today's classrooms. My thesis is important within the context of Canadian classrooms because it acts as an agent for social change and cultural relevance through a critical lens. The purpose of this approach, then, is to demonstrate an understanding of the complexity of our society and schooling system through social critique and proposals for change. More importantly, my thesis is grounded in equity; in which critically-conscious hip-hop serves as a bridge for students' experiences, interests, and independent identities.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

My thesis is a theoretical study that incorporates existing literature on hip-hop and education to illustrate critically-conscious hip-hop as both a literary and culturally relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1992) tool for teaching and learning. The counter-storytelling portion of my thesis is comprised of both written scenarios from my own memories of schooling, as well as my hip-hop muse; a powerful outlet for personal reflection and creativity which documents my journey as an Indo-Canadian student with family roots in Northern India seeking a culturally relevant curriculum (Ladson-Billings, 1992). The concept of muse is defined by the process of "becoming absorbed in thought [and] to say or think reflectively" while engaging with a "source of inspiration [or] guiding genius" (Muse, 2013). I include excerpts of my hip-hop muse to problematize and contest the prevalence of a normalized, White, middle-class curricula (Villegas & Lucas, 2002) that silences and omits diversity in Canadian classrooms. The counter-storytelling portion of this thesis is a small component of the larger body of research literature that is conducted by scholars in the field of hip-hop and education. I advance the notion that critically-conscious hip-hop must be used to correct the problem of student disengagement within classrooms. I argue that standard educational practices problematically safeguard the notion of inadequate curricula and further disengage youth by disregarding their cultural traits. These traits include: individual experiences, student interests, and racialized positions within society. To highlight the importance of these three key themes in relation to both curriculum theory and students' learning, I discuss social reconstructionism (Ornstein, Pajak, & Ornstein, 2011) in order to demonstrate how it can be used to critique a contemporary educational curriculum that disengages and marginalizes students. I consider the racialized positions of high school youth who

experience schooling as a process of being pushed out rather than dropping out (Dei, 1997).

My critical analysis of curriculum theory and student disengagement within high schools

highlights how academic streaming into nonacademic programs marginalizes student

identities and interests (Ornstein et al., 2011). Among these student identities and interests is

critically-conscious hip-hop; a culture and form of thought that seeks reengagement for

youth through empowerment of their out-of-school discourse.

Theoretical Framework

My theoretical framework is based on the research literature regarding student

disengagement and lack of cultural relevance, as well as critically-conscious hip-hop

pedagogy to reengage youth. These two areas serve as a guide to address my key research

questions: Why does student disengagement exist in classrooms? How does critically-

conscious hip-hop promote student engagement? What approaches can be taken to integrate

critically-conscious hip-hop into contemporary curricula? My theoretical framework is also

fixed on criticality in two ways: firstly, it critiques the issue of student disengagement and

the lack of cultural relevance (Ladson-Billings, 1992) within classrooms; secondly,

critically-conscious hip-hop pedagogy is suggested as a corrective means to offset student

disengagement.

Student Disengagement and Lack of Cultural Relevance

I confront the issue of student disengagement and the lack of cultural relevance

(Ladson-Billings, 1992) in schools through my support for critically-conscious hip-hop in

classrooms. I argue that student disengagement is often a by-product of standardized

curricula that homogenizes students' interests, experiences, and identities. I insist that

critically-conscious hip-hop, in which social consciousness, historical frameworks for

understanding oppression, and social critique serve as the basis for the music, must be acknowledged for educational purposes. To support my argument on current educational practices, scholars like Dei (1997), Hallman (2009), Forell (2006), and Rodríguez (2009) supplement my thesis by discussing how researchers know that the issue of student disengagement exists. These particular scholars have dedicated their time to conducting empirical research that gathers data through studies (both quantitative and qualitative) for the purpose of explaining the current issue at hand.

In order to understand certain approaches that can be taken to address the issue of student disengagement, researchers like McNeil (2006) and Ornstein et al. (2011) outline specific curriculum philosophies that work to eliminate oppressive educational approaches such as essentialism (Ornstein et al., 2011). The curriculum philosophy that I examine in my thesis is social reconstructionism. It is described as a teaching approach in which educators "serve as agents for change and reform" (Ornstein et al., 2011, p. 6). Moreover, it focuses on social, political, and economic issues from both a contemporary and historical perspective in order to gain insight into the limitations of current curricula (Ornstein et al., 2011). While this curriculum philosophy examines problems within our society today, the notion of reconstruction demands that schools be rebuilt in an equitable way. McNeil (2006) outlines the premise of social reconstructionism by stating the following:

> [The Social Reconstructionist] teacher relates national, world, and local purposes to the students' goals. Students can thus use their interests to help find solutions to the social problems emphasized in their classes. The teacher stresses cooperation with the community and its resources. (p. 25)

The teacher who uses a social reconstructionist approach, then, advocates for the inclusion of marginalized voices.

Social reconstructionism effectively argues against reproducing racialized students' marginality through existing White, middle-class curriculum discourse (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). The purpose of the social reconstructionist approach is to address areas of concern in the curriculum (such as the omission of students' background knowledge) through alternative forms of learning. I will further discuss social reconstructionism and additional contrasting curriculum philosophies such as perennialism and essentialism in Chapter Two. My thesis focuses on social reconstructionism within the context of an educational system to consider how a curriculum must change in order to "provide each learner with intrinsically rewarding experiences that contribute to personal liberation and development" (McNeil, 2006, p. 5).

Critically-Conscious Hip-Hop Pedagogy

I discuss educational research methodologies that address the issue of student disengagement and outline the tenets of critically-conscious hip-hop which include: self-empowerment, increased social awareness, and improved literacy skills (Irizarry, 2009). I argue that these tenets can function within a reconstructionist approach because they can be used to support students' voices and enrich critical learning within schools. I use critical discourse analysis (CDA) for deciphering lyrics featured in critically-conscious hip-hop songs. Such lyrics aim to provide the listener with a vocabulary based upon a critical language that clearly articulates the struggles of oppressed and marginalized groups in society. This critical language awareness is conveyed through an engaged understanding of the relationship between text and talk (van Dijk, 1995). The language of critically-conscious

hip-hop serves two purposes: firstly, it holds an important role for being a source of social commentary (for students and teachers); secondly, it holds critical thinking possibilities for its listening audiences through written text (lyrics) and talk (rap).

It is important to identify why critically-conscious hip-hop is central to addressing student marginality within the school curriculum and why it holds new possibilities for student learning. From an educator's perspective, it provides the means to develop a curriculum and teaching approach that affirms a social reconstructionist approach. From a student's vantage point, it allows students to become engaged with a culturally relevant curriculum. However, teachers must embrace the perspective of critically-conscious hip-hop artists along with their social commentary. Embracing hip-hop requires an understanding of "[how] social inequalities are produced and perpetuated through systemic discrimination and justified through a societal ideology of merit, social mobility, and individual responsibility" (Sturm & Guinier, 1996, p. 953). Educators must arrive at a point where they can label the current curriculum as oppressive and actively use social commentary to engage in the critical examination of "the role that schools play in this reproduction and legitimation process" (Villegas & Lucas, 2002, p. 22). In my thesis, I urge educators to incorporate critical race theory (CRT) to understand how the omission of critical inquiry into race relations and social inequities is a persistent problem within today's classrooms. CRT provides a lens to analyze issues of social inequity and a lack of cultural relevance (Ladson-Billings, 1992) within classrooms because it positions these experiences within a social, political, and historical context.

Currently, dialogue within schools is channeled through White, dominant, Eurocentric discourse (Delpit, 1992). The notion of dominant, Eurocentric discourse within

schools is represented by classroom activities and the White, normalized cultures of schools (Gee, 1990). At the same time, there is a lack of regard for how the "constantly evolving landscape" (Williams, 2009, p. 1) of popular culture is silenced in school curricula; allowing schools to contribute to the absence of cultural relevance amongst educators. Why is any of this important to study? How do we know that critically-conscious hip-hop material in the curriculum will benefit disengaged students? The notion of asking *all* students to learn through a rigid and pre-arranged White, dominant, Eurocentric curriculum is problematic for two reasons: it limits students' creativity by imposing the cookie-cutter method, and it also contradicts popular assumptions about schools operating as equitable spaces. My thesis sets out to provide educators with one of many opportunities to approach the art of educating through a critical lens via critically-conscious hip-hop in the teaching and learning process. Any preconceived notions of teaching the right way or the wrong way further complicate the issue of culturally indifferent practices. Instead, pedagogical practices must be grounded in discourse that emphasizes cultural relevance amongst educators and students (Ladson-Billings, 1992). Critically-conscious hip-hop does not attempt to undermine educational curricula; it operates as a vehicle for furthering the development of critical thinking and critical-consciousness amongst students while allotting space for self-expression and self-exploration.

Critical Reflexivity in Research through Counter-Storytelling

I discuss two phases in my educational journey from high school to university. Each phase is represented by a scenario that sheds light on an educational issue that challenged me as a racialized youth while I navigated through a school system that silenced my aspirations and interests.

Scenario One: Student Resistance to Oppressive Hegemonic Silences

Looking over my high school report cards, I carefully review a teacher's remark in the "comments" box: "Harjot is having difficulty grasping basic concepts." Perhaps dejected by my teacher's statement at the time, I can only speculate now on how I had failed to grasp something that was solely conveyed through hegemonic discourse (Gee, 1990). Classrooms failed to acknowledge my own racialized discourse as an "identity kit for ways of being in the world" (Gee, 1990, p. 142). My failure to recognize the implications of normalized classroom discourse during high school demonstrated my general disengagement from anything school-related. In hindsight, flunking multiple courses in the early years of high school was prompted by a lack of concern for reciting chalkboard lessons. My own interests involved writing and reflecting with others to promote open dialogue within classrooms. However, these kinds of learning opportunities did not transpire. I found it difficult to grasp the concept of knowledge as static and entirely encapsulated by textbook material. I struggled with the type of knowledge that was considered acceptable because student knowledge outside of the classroom was deemed irrelevant within the learning context.

Finding a common ground between my own interests and a rigid curriculum proved to be a difficult task. Critically-conscious hip-hop had taught me more about sociopolitical issues than any course I had ever taken in school. Writing poetry and verses on my own time and outside of the classroom also helped me to develop critical reflection skills and written skills. As a listener, I used the lyrics in early critically-conscious hip-hop music as a model for constructing my own writing that addressed meaningful issues. With the limitations set in place for restricting student creativity through a pre-arranged curriculum, I had absolutely no desire to engage with material that did not spark my interests. I was more

concerned with discussing real world discourse that affected me both inside and outside of school. Bullying, experimentation with drugs, and body image were certainly topics of interest for multiple students. However, I never felt comfortable enough in school to talk about these issues.

My written reflections throughout high school were a consequence of listening to hip-hop music and also a release mechanism that favored self-growth through the development of an independent identity. For my thesis, I have identified this writing process as my hip-hop muse. The lack of real world discourse within classrooms had compelled me to write and reflect on my own. Perhaps I was involuntarily neglecting the most important facet of writing that showcased my critical reflection skills by not sharing it with others (particularly my teachers). It was not until I had reached my senior years of high school that I realized I had the potential to pursue my interests in hip-hop through post-secondary studies. At that point, however, I knew how much work lay ahead of me. I became acquainted with the idea of regularly attending summer school and night school to make up for lost credits. I also accepted the challenge of convincing my teachers that I was in fact serious about my education and, in turn, needed their support to facilitate my journey. Nonetheless, the latter proved to be more difficult than the actual process of reading information, memorizing it, and regurgitating it for tests and presentations.

I can recall one negative yet powerful incident that ultimately changed my outlook on life and education. During an appointment with my guidance counselor in grade 12, I had inquired about night school courses for the purpose of meeting university requirements. To my surprise, my counselor simply replied: "Harjot, we have to be realistic. University will never be the right fit for you." Was I too intelligent for university? Or was I too racially

different? Was there something else that would be the right fit for me? How was she capable

of making such a quick assumption? After all, I had only met with her three times during

my high school career. She insisted that I look at options that allowed for direct entry into

the workplace through temporary job placements. At that moment, I realized that I had been

prematurely streamed into a non-academic route by my guidance counselor. School mottos

that preached hopeful attitudes for the future had failed me; success held limited spots only

for students with structure, a clear purpose, and a conventional attitude towards learning.

My guidance counselor ultimately served as the catalyst for my motivation that year; I *had*

to prove her wrong. At the time, I could not help but think of critically-conscious rapper and

social activist Tupac Shakur's lyrical teachings: "now that I'm grown, I got my mind on

being something. Don't wanna be another statistic out here doing nothing" (1995, 6). Six

months later, in an act of retaliation, I posted my university acceptance letter on the

guidance department's bulletin board.

Scenario Two: Inserting Hip-hop into the Post-Secondary Landscape

After having the rare opportunity to write about critically-conscious hip-hop during

my 4th year in an English program at university, I anticipated my professor's feedback on

my work. She had displayed a profound interest in understanding hip-hop from a literary

standpoint. I spent countless hours explaining how hip-hop had influenced and shaped my

identity as a young man. My association with hip-hop culture was beyond music because it

served as the medium between reality and fantasy. In a sense, our connection was

reciprocal; critically-conscious hip-hop granted me with a critical language with reference to

a social critique of society and I echoed the importance of this knowledge through my

written reflections. To my surprise, my professor ultimately dismissed the possibility of

linking the implications of Toni Morrison's work with Tupac Shakur's music and poetry. Maybe the term *hip-hop* was too potent for those who were unfamiliar with critical-consciousness and rap. As a result, I accepted the lowest mark I had received during my undergraduate career and remained hopeful for my graduate school applications.

Although I received an offer of admission into an institution and program that sparked my interests, I took a one-year hiatus from academia to focus on researching hip-hop's feasibility in learning spaces. The excess of hip-hop courses at the post-secondary level convinced me there was a valid opportunity to integrate it into high school curricula. My absence also spawned a surplus of reflective writing that helped me to create a sense of belonging in both the hip-hop world and academic world. I had finally gathered enough courage to openly share my experiences with others through researching, writing, and reflecting. I no longer wanted to simply engage with material that did not personally connect with me. In order to passionately share my experiences and ideas with others, I sought acceptance for *all* forms of hip-hop within academia. As a result, the following year, I received an offer of admission into the Master of Education program at Brock University. I set my sights on making an impact in the classroom through my knowledge on critically-conscious hip-hop's positive influence on youth. I was also interested in exploring my own fascination with critically-conscious hip-hop as a tool for producing written reflections that were self-liberating and motivating.

After sharing my experiences with other students in graduate school, I received valuable feedback that somewhat altered my perception of hip-hop culture. Although many of my peers agreed with critically-conscious hip-hop's positive tenets, the prevailing images of sex, violence, and materialism in mainstream hip-hop held precedence over critical-

consciousness. Hyper-sexualized representations of both men and women clearly resonated with hip-hop listeners and non-listeners. Nonetheless, I began thinking about practical approaches for addressing issues of hyper-sexualization, misogyny, and violence within classrooms. I had a clear understanding of topics that involved feminist ideology, historical references to women's liberation movements, and hegemonic masculinity. These topics could certainly align themselves alongside harmful forms of hip-hop that reproduced social, political, and cultural harm through sexism, homophobia, and misogyny. As a result, I looked at critically-conscious hip-hop within the field of education as an instructive tool that could one day make learning more meaningful and also become a part of common classroom practice (Ladson-Billings, 2011).

The two scenarios I provided above are indicative of a larger sociopolitical issue that positions hip-hop within a complicated framework. My interests in critically-conscious hip-hop during high school were disregarded in favor of a normalized curriculum. In my 4th year of university, similar experiences arose when my professor failed to make a logical connection between critically-conscious hip-hop and African American literature. These scenarios represent the counter-storytelling portion of my thesis and highlight my continued advocacy for critically-conscious hip-hop in schools to prevent future disengagement for marginalized and racialized youth.

The Emergence of Hip-Hop Culture

There is a common misconception that the fascination with hip-hop culture initially developed through its portrayal of material goods. Beginning with the emergence of fat gold chains during the early age of hip-hop and later moving on to expensive cars and platinum jewelry, hip-hop culture has embodied materialism and hyper-consumerism for several

years. Rappers like Baby and Paul Wall have virtually made a career out of the glorification of hyper-consumerism through lyrics that brag about surplus wealth. However, during the onset of hip-hop culture in the early 1980s, it was the social commentary within hip-hop music that helped create a rapport with racialized working-class citizens. Rose (1994) explains that hip-hop gradually developed in the post-industrial cities that witnessed gradual cuts in funding for social service programs and saw an influx of corporate developers that were purchasing real estate to create luxury housing. As a result, working-class citizens were left to deal with unaffordable housing, a shrinking job market, and "diminishing social services" (Rose, 1994, p. 74). Meanwhile, hip-hop had rapidly transformed into an expressive tool that allowed youth to articulate their concerns over this period of "social alienation" (Baszille, 2009, p. 7).

To combat this alienation, hip-hop artists effectively adopted a component of organized speeches that advocated for social equity and ultimately combined it with music to create a product that spoke to the masses (Rose, 1994). This product is now referred to as rapping; in which rhymes are often spoken or sung. It is important to remember that it is unfeasible to differentiate rap from hip-hop because rap serves as the vocal component for creating hip-hop music. Without rapping, a separate genre known as hip-hop instrumentals is created with minimal rapping and an increased presence of turntable techniques. Hip-hop music, then, is a sub-culture within the larger culture of hip-hop (Sealey-Ruiz & Greene, 2011). Examples of other sub-cultures that derive from hip-hop include graffiti art, poetry, and break dancing.

Critically-conscious hip-hop music embraces the multiplicity of rapping and writing styles that include spoken word and freestyling. In the early stages of hip-hop, when local

artists discovered that they could profit from rapping, hip-hop exceeded the traditional platform of addressing everyday struggles and instead invited listeners to join them on their quest for personal and financial growth. The combination of social conditions in cities and the social commentary within hip-hop music translated into a cultural phenomenon that echoes even 30 years later. Not surprisingly, contemporary scholars and hip-hop critics like Tanner, Asbridge, & Wortley (2009) argue that hip-hop is a meaningless form of music that is long detached from its historically significant roots. It is fascinating how some may forget that issues of racism, sexism, and poverty still exist today. It is these exact issues that are addressed in the songs of many critically-conscious hip-hop artists. For example, rappers like Common (2007) and Mos Def (2008) rap about poverty and unjustified job cuts while artists like Q-Tip (2008) comment on feelings of self-empowerment and self-fulfillment. Even mainstream artists like Kanye West (2010) have created countless songs dedicated to social issues that affect communities today. Although some of these artists undeniably have their sights set on monetary gain through their music, the element of critical awareness in society remains evident.

Understandably, it is safe to presume that hip-hop critics simply cannot escape from the contradicting portrayals of misogyny and hyper-sexuality in the majority of mainstream hip-hop music. However, the misrepresentation of hip-hop as a one-dimensional genre is problematic because it unfairly dismisses critically-conscious hip-hop as part and parcel of mainstream hip-hop music. Perhaps the more important question to ask is whether academics would classify punk music, heavy metal, and country music as simply rock music. Likewise, consider the limited selection of hip-hop in popular music stores. If there is a significantly large hip-hop section, how often do we see sections for critically-conscious

hip-hop, underground hip-hop, alternative hip-hop, or gangsta rap? On the other hand, think of how deviations of rock music (i.e., alternative rock, punk rock, metal, pop rock, and easy listening) are neatly divided into separate sections within music stores. This example is important to consider within the context of assigning hip-hop with a singular identity. Evidently, preconceived notions of *all* hip-hop music being the same extends further beyond the field of education. My goal, however, is to generate awareness and educate others on the importance of researching forms of hip-hop (i.e., critically-conscious hip-hop) to support the development of equitable learning spaces in high schools.

Background to the Problem

The current school climate is reinforced by a positivist orientation. In this case, a positivist approach can be best described as a teaching practice that creates a hierarchy amongst teachers and students within the classroom. For example, Hinchey (2010) indicates that a positivist approach to teaching puts educators in power by labeling them as "the expert. […] Books provide some information, and the expert teacher clarifies or extends this information for students" (p. 44). As a result, supporters for this style of teaching insist that students are not expected to critically challenge any of the material because they cannot contribute to a topic of which they have limited knowledge. By considering these types of positivist assumptions, we can begin to understand how educational activities and curricula are routinely accepted "as part of the way things are" (Hinchey, 2010, p. 57).

The curriculum is mentioned frequently throughout my thesis and it is important to define it, as well as distinguish which curriculum I am examining. The majority of my research on student disengagement and the lack of cultural relevance (Ladson-Billings, 1992) within schools is situated in the United States. However, findings reported by

researchers like James Irizarry (2009) are not exclusively restricted by geographical contexts. Irizarry's (2009) research on hip-hop's impact on high school youth in the northeastern region of the United States can certainly relate with urban centers and culturally diverse clusters throughout North America. Issues that deal with racism, sexism, classism, socioeconomic disparities, poverty, and crime are interchangeable between Canada and the United States. Though the magnitude of these issues may be larger in places like the United States, traces of social inequity are universally apparent on all scales. Looking at research conducted on curricula at the high school level, examples of student disengagement provide insight into classrooms that lack culturally responsive (Irizarry, 2009) teaching practices. Scholars like Heidi Hallman (2009) and Awad Ibrahim (2003) study youth who combat at-risk labels through multiple hip-hop literacies. Research findings are inevitably relevant within Canadian classrooms where multiracial identities and socioeconomic backgrounds play a role in student identities within schools.

Individual experiences in the classroom are important to acknowledge because they promote the idea of a lived curriculum. Ted Aoki (1993) differentiates curriculum-as-plan from the lived curriculum by examining standardized methods for teaching and evaluating versus a multiplicity of curricula experienced by educators and students. In this case, the curriculum-as-plan is best defined by a set of principles enacted by school officials and departments that mandate teaching approaches (Aoki, 1993). For example, the educational framework that represents a particular teaching style is essentially constructed with the planner's interests at heart (Aoki, 1993). The lived curriculum, according to Aoki (1993), embodies the interests of each student along with their interactions with the educator and their school environment. The lived curriculum, then, is intertwined with social

reconstructionism and situates students' experiences within an educational context to provide educators with an understanding of how student identities are shaped by cultural influences both inside and outside of school. Aoki's research on the lived curriculum is discussed further in my thesis in order to examine how students' interests in critically-conscious hip-hop can be bridged with planned education.

For Williams (2009), the process of recognizing students' experiences in the classroom translates into the acceptance of students' values and simultaneously integrates their identities and lives outside of school. Many students' identities are considerably influenced and reshaped by hip-hop culture today. For some Black youth, though, negotiating an identity is based on society's perception of racial representations and behavior (Ibrahim, 2003). This process is harmful for racialized youth because it positions them in a racially conscious society that expects them to be the "marginalized Other" (Ibrahim, 2003, p. 59). Incorporating critically-conscious hip-hop into classrooms must not rely on social labels, but instead consider *how* multiple factors influence each student's identity. Of course, not every student in school is an avid hip-hop fan. However, critically-conscious hip-hop fundamentals can potentially speak to everyone through music that portrays images of empowerment, success, and personal strife. Specifically, many minority youth engage with hip-hop discourse to make sense of how race operates in their daily lives and how their position within their social environment is an opportunity "to critique traditional schooling for failing to critically incorporate their racialized ethnic/cultural identities in school dialogue" (Pulido, 2009, p. 67). For these students, engaging with hip-hop music is the act of searching for an identity to combat systems of injustice.

The topic of injustice is important to consider within the context of schools because it highlights issues of low teacher expectations, academic labeling, and the differential treatment of racialized students (Dei, Mazzuca, McIsaac, & Zine, 1997). George Dei (1997), a renowned scholar in the field of Canadian anti-racist education, suggests that injustices in schools contribute profoundly to what society perceives as "dropping out of school" (1997, p. 8). Though Dei focuses specifically on Black youth and their schooling experiences, my thesis echoes his work on critiquing student disengagement as a result of the absence of cultural relevance (Ladson-Billings, 1992) in classrooms. Instead of focusing on racialized minority students as "a group to be feared, monitored, and channeled to restrictive learning environments" (Solomon, 2004, para. 8), a genuine approach to implementing ethical educational practices must exist. In essence, Solomon's emphasis on Blacks' schooling experiences interrelates with my overall study on hip-hop and education. How much of the fear linked to hip-hop is in fact a constituent of fixed assumptions about Blacks? In Chapter Two of my thesis, I consider Dei's theory on being pushed out rather than dropping out in relation to Black youth. Dei's (1997) theory on Black student disengagement and social alienation expands upon notions of Black identities, interests, and experiences that outline the issue of a pre-determined curriculum which undercuts Black students' academic success. In addition to this, I also examine Patrick Solomon's (2004) work on schools as repressive institutions for Black youth.

My own experience as a racialized student in high school illustrates both the internal and external struggle for achieving academic success. On one hand, the internal struggle can be best described as the lack of desire to learn about topics that were not of importance to me because they solely reflected dominant discourse (Delpit, 1992; Gee, 1990). On the

other hand, my external struggle as a racialized hip-hop fanatic was not supported by the curriculum. Through the current research, I want to discuss these problematic omissions in the curriculum by considering social reconstructionism as a tool for critiquing educational practices that limit student engagement through discourse which perpetuates normativity in classrooms (Ornstein et al., 2011). I argue that individuals' interests in hip-hop provide resourceful avenues for engaging students through the possibility of culturally relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1992) teaching practices. Ladson-Billings' (1992) understanding of cultural relevance within classrooms overlaps with Thompson's (2008) analysis on the mechanics of hip-hop lyrics. Contrary to traditional forms of educating that promote learning through textual analyses, Thompson (2008) suggests that hip-hop lyrics, through written reflections and interpretation, allow students to explore ways of "communicating between communities and ourselves" (p. 155). The difficulty, however, in contemporary classrooms, is implementing critically-conscious hip-hop lyrics in structured curricula.

Teachers' use of textbooks as the most credible source of information (or knowledge) is damaging in several ways. It disregards the notion of living and learning through experience and simultaneously confines students to a classroom environment that channels learning exclusively through the educator. For example, inner-city high schools in Chicago report that 25% of minority youth are expected not to graduate (Pulido, 2009). Moreover, according to Pulido's (2009) research, 48% of students attending these schools are African American, while 38% are Latina/os. Aside from low-income backgrounds and high-crime neighborhoods, schools must be looked upon as perpetrators for failing to provide these students with a meaningful education. Nonetheless, educators cannot be held entirely accountable for this matter, as there are power relations that limit their flexibility in

bringing external material into classrooms. For example, like the power relations present within classrooms amongst students and educators, a hierarchy outside of the classroom amongst educators and members of the board of education also exists to assure that a predetermined curriculum is successfully enacted. The difficulty with pursuing a positivist method to educating students is that it blatantly limits the knowledge and experience inherent within the classroom. Like Hinchey (2010), I would argue that a positivist classroom is best defined as "predictable, orderly, sequential, and managed by the teacher, who is the most important and knowledgeable person in the room" (p. 45). In my thesis, however, I focus on knowledge and experience as reciprocal forces through culturally relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1992) approaches that promote cohesion between students and educators.

Critically-conscious hip-hop embodies culturally relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1992) pedagogy by stressing the significance of social matters that in turn affect students' lives in both positive and negative ways. More importantly, self-exploration through written reflections, critical thinking, and communication with educators generates student engagement within classrooms. Critically-conscious hip-hop, in any case, (re)introduces issues of inequity and simultaneously provides avenues for students to enhance their literary competency. A large quantity of research has been conducted on the correlation between disengaged students and contemporary curricula/classrooms. Although courses such as English represent different literary genres that display unique writing styles, scholars like Kirkland (2007) argue that students can "learn as much about language and literature from reading Tupac as [they] can from Shakespeare" (p. 491). In this case, rappers may be working with a predetermined bias set against them because they are perceived as

entertainers rather than legitimate writers. It is also likely that individuals who listen to hip-hop music do not pay much attention to lyrical content. To make sense of hip-hop lyrics, critical discourse analysis (CDA) can be used to critically examine the relationship between language and (con)text. This methodology is practical for educators who are prepared to "ground their work in a larger sociopolitical context" (Irizarry, 2009, p. 500) and address issues of oppression and social injustice.

Specific programs in North America have made strides in incorporating rap lyrics into everyday classroom discourse in order to create a sense of unity between students and educators. Programs like Hip-Hop Education Literacy Program (H.E.L.P) and The Remix Project in Toronto, Ontario have actively conjoined student interests with effective teaching practices. These programs are discussed in my thesis as advocates for sustaining equity within schools and communities through student engagement within an academic framework. Although only a small percentage of schools have embraced hip-hop as a tool for learning, the support for equitable classrooms and research on disengaged students will ultimately garner adequate strength to make necessary changes to the field of education. I consider my thesis to be a unique contribution to the field of education with hopes of setting hip-hop-infused classrooms in motion.

<div align="center">**Statement of the Problem**</div>

There are factors aside from the curriculum that contribute to student disengagement. The concept of intersectionality can assist with the identification and discussion of these additional social issues. According to Knudsen (2008), intersectionality is defined as "a theory to analyze how social and cultural categories intertwine [...examining] the relationships between gender, race, ethnicity, disability, sexuality, class

and nationality" (p. 61). Factors such as socioeconomic status, race, gender, and cultural capital all play a role in student engagement. Intersectionality mirrors social reconstructionism because it is grounded in relating multiple discourses to a student's single identity (McNeil, 2006). Examining gender, race, ethnicity, and sexuality intersects with relating "national, world, and local purposes to students' goals [and identities]" (McNeil, 2006, p. 25). However, it is problematic to presume that the lack of cultural relevance in classrooms has only recently become an area of concern. If external factors outside of school are contributing to student disengagement, should not a well thought-out curriculum work comprehensively to reengage students? For many students escaping the harsh realities of life outside of school, the classroom is often an extension of the home. The classroom should then be treated as an open space that not only operates as a resource for information, but also equips students with the skills to cope effectively with difficult situations. Incorporating critically-conscious hip-hop into classrooms provides students with an opportunity to creatively express themselves in a safe space that encourages self-exploration.

Purpose of the Study

To decode the purpose of this study and situate it in a context that others can conceive is an immensely difficult task. How can I render images of a curriculum that sets several students up for academic failure? How can I assure that my dedication to addressing this issue is not exclusively driven by emotion? Placing a theoretical lens over personal experiences can sometimes be challenging. However, for my thesis, I confronted these challenges by integrating numerous experiences of students and educators (documented within a wide range of research studies) alongside methodology that takes a detailed

approach to understanding critically-conscious hip-hop music. Experiences included within

my thesis consist of research on high school students and teachers across North America.

Scholars like Rodriguez (2009), Thompson (2008), and Low (2009) discuss the role that

hip-hop has in classroom learning. As Baszille (2009) suggests, an important part of re-

thinking the relationship between education, social justice, and hip-hop culture is

"beginning with a critical awareness of how hip hop culture counters the hegemony of the

official school curriculum" (p. 6). Before coalescing critically-conscious hip-hop and the

current curriculum into one solid educational structure, hip-hop culture needs to be

understood from a critical standpoint. My thesis seeks to challenge preconceived notions of

hip-hop culture in order to confidently introduce it into the school curriculum. As a result,

the portion of this thesis that concentrates on critical discourse analysis (CDA) and

deciphering critically-conscious hip-hop music is a means for understanding the creativity

and intricacy behind the music. The incorporation of research conducted by additional

scholars in the field represents the voices of thousands of students (including myself) who

absorb the meaningful messages embedded in the music and culture.

<div align="center">**Importance of the Study**</div>

My thesis does not only aspire to contribute to existing literature within the field of

hip-hop and education. It intends on having a lasting impact on educators, policymakers,

and students. I closely examine the implications of data collected through existing research

and tie the information in with my personal experiences as a disengaged student during high

school. Furthermore, CDA creates a framework for understanding how critically-conscious

hip-hop is exemplary of critical thinking and self-empowerment. The use of critically-

conscious hip-hop in schools, then, can be perceived as a "fund of knowledge [in education]

and has the potential to improve teaching practices and positively influence learning opportunities and outcomes" (Irizarry, 2009, p. 489) for students. Perhaps one of the more unique aspects of my thesis is that it borrows counter-storytelling from critical race theory (CRT) to align critically-conscious hip-hop with a culturally relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1992) curriculum. The counter-storytelling portion of my thesis embodies my knowledge and experience as a student. The research literature in my thesis does not focus exclusively on either male or female students or those from specific ethnic backgrounds. It considers all (disengaged) students when commenting on the benefits of a hip-hop infused curriculum. Though the formation of hip-hop took place within low-income, racialized communities, it would be counter-productive to designate critically-conscious hip-hop to only those who could identify with it.

Critically-conscious hip-hop does not dictate *who* can and cannot be a listener because its constituents, whether sociopolitical critique or historical inquiry, serve as social commentary and reflective thinking for everyone. The notion of identifying with hip-hop culture has more to do with understanding it than representing it through a racial identity. In a sense, a large portion of critically-conscious hip-hop's duty is to generate awareness on issues that marginalized groups of people experience every day. My passion for advocating for an inclusive curriculum is fuelled by my experiences and desire to enact purposeful change in schools. My work is grounded in Villegas & Lucas' (2002) principles of cultural responsiveness in classrooms through social consciousness and understanding "how learners create knowledge and are capable of promoting knowledge construction" (p. 20). Lastly, the integration of my hip-hop muse into this thesis does not operate as a voice that speaks on behalf of all students. To address this, I maximized the amount of relevant existing literature

that supports my argument. If the counter-storytelling portion of this thesis consciously expresses concern for the educational curriculum that I experienced from 2001-2005, then the research literature conducted afterwards which produced similar results ultimately comments on the perpetuation of inequity in schools.

Scope and Limitations of the Study

This study aims to depict the unethical structure of educational curricula in contemporary times. It critiques teaching methods widely practiced throughout North America and advocates for the integration of critically-conscious hip-hop into classrooms. In order to accomplish this, my research stems from two separate sources: the results of studies conducted by scholars in the field, and the incorporation of my own hip-hop muse. The results from the research literature mentioned within my thesis are generally gathered from the last 3 to 5 years. There are limitations to my study that should not be considered drawbacks, but opportunities to critically challenge the scope and standpoint of my research study. For example, I constructed a conceptual framework for understanding the plight of disengaged students by considering participant answers from other studies. A large portion of the data presented within my thesis is dependent upon the experience and insight of researchers in the field. To counter the absence of active participants in my research, I incorporated several perspectives on hip-hop within schools to amplify the scope of my study. Because the field of hip-hop and education is considerably large, I embraced my thesis as a learning opportunity in order to construct a solid foundation for understanding the field that will promote my future research at the doctoral level.

One of the most common misconceptions within society is that hip-hop can only pertain to a specific crowd of people. Of course, not every disengaged student is an avid

hip-hop fan; but the parallels between hip-hop and literature, popular culture, and art cannot be overlooked. Consider, for example, Whelan's (2007) study on a high school English teacher in East Los Angeles who encourages students to "build bridges of relevance between hip-hop and academics" (p. 50). More specifically, the teacher, Alan Sitomer, draws parallels between Shakespeare's writing and the verses of highly proclaimed rap artists (Whelan, 2007). In a sense, then, the incorporation of critically-conscious hip-hop into classrooms cannot exclusively be conceived as music. Instead, the literary components of the genre must also be considered as beneficial tools for assisting students with developing a critical language.

It can sometimes be difficult for educators to handpick a certain hip-hop artist to study in the classroom; especially if the educator has limited knowledge on the culture of hip-hop. However, allowing students to decide on a hip-hop curriculum is also somewhat problematic because it leaves room for potentially harmful forms of hip-hop to enter into a safe space. This is a limitation within my study because it would be careless to completely disregard the vulgarity of the majority of mainstream hip-hop today. However, as I mentioned earlier, because corporate executives and the media promote the sale of this more popularized form of music, it should not overshadow the abundance of critically-conscious hip-hop that is still available on the market. Although educators can create boundaries as to what type of hip-hop is allowed to enter into the classroom (i.e., non-homophobic, non-sexist), alluding to the type of hip-hop that appeals to millions of people globally can be used for persuading students to think about the motives behind this phenomenon. This, in turn, encourages students to think about larger issues such as media representations and the counter-productive nature of this form of hip-hop.

Lastly, a potential limitation in this study interconnects with my shared experiences that are channeled through my hip-hop muse. My writing as a young, Indo-Canadian male living in Brampton, Ontario exhibits the positive effects of hip-hop music. I believe that my experiences are parallel to those of other students who are situated within a positivist-orientated classroom. I argue this point by featuring examples from my hip-hop muse in order to contextualize it in relation to the voices of other students who are featured in a range of studies conducted by educational researchers. Acknowledging the experiences of others is important, but critically learning from them is perhaps the most significant component for self-growth. However, I cannot claim that my story speaks for an entire population of disengaged students; rather, it echoes the sentiment associated with unethical, positivist-orientated attitudes towards educating youth. Furthermore, my hip-hop muse speaks beyond the need to intertwine hip-hop and education; it demonstrates feelings of detachment and isolation that are associated with a curriculum that does not take cultural relevance (Ladson-Billings, 1992) into account. My experiences, then, combined with the experiences of other students presented in my thesis, act as agents for social commentary on an educational system that is insufficient for providing each student with a fair chance to succeed.

Outline of the Thesis

In Chapter Two of my thesis, I conduct an analysis of existing research literature in order to construct a framework for understanding hip-hop within the context of education. Through the theoretical lenses of student disengagement and the lack of cultural relevance, as well as critically-conscious hip-hop pedagogy, this process involves studying the work of contributing scholars that examine hip-hop and education and also considering how

critically-conscious hip-hop facilitates student engagement within classrooms. This chapter creates a knowledgeable foundation of critically-conscious hip-hop music for readers that are unfamiliar with it. A portion of this chapter also considers existing research literature that challenges my position as an advocate for critically-conscious hip-hop. As a result, the literature review in my thesis provides an overview of the current situation, positive ways to incorporate hip-hop into the curriculum, and the perspectives of those who are opposed to this ideology.

In Chapter Three, I provide a detailed breakdown of the methodology in my thesis. I highlight how the combination of critical discourse analysis (CDA) and critical race theory (CRT) helped me to understand how power relations, language, and social commentary work within the realm of critically-conscious hip-hop. With CDA, I comment on how sociopolitical issues are often reflected upon within critically-conscious hip-hop. More importantly, I challenge the notion of lyrics as *just* words and argue that written verses have an impact on listeners. To better understand the relationship between issues of inequity and their critique in critically-conscious hip-hop music, I also outline counter-storytelling for the benefit of detailing my experiences as a listener. On one hand, my thesis integrates critical discourse analysis (CDA) as a research methodology to examine how critically-conscious hip-hop lyrics resonate with high school students. On the other hand, my thesis integrates critical race theory (CRT) for the purpose of understanding how social inequities are recognized by students within a political context. The conceptual backdrop of this thesis consists of the positive impact that critically-conscious hip-hop has on students by considering existing literature along with my hip-hop muse. My hip-hop muse is presented in the form of reflective poems and short verses and draws from critically-conscious hip-

hop music as a source for inspiration. Coupling these two methodologies with existing research data enables me to take on a multi-faceted approach for understanding the complex relationship between critically-conscious hip-hop music and education. This process also outlines critically-conscious hip-hop as my muse; a powerful outlet for personal reflection and creativity.

In Chapter Four, I conduct an analysis of data that is gathered through existing research and also through the study of selected hip-hop artists and songs. Although the counter-storytelling design portion of my thesis is essentially a qualitative study, the data that is included in the study stems from my hip-hop muse during high school. This chapter will first discuss the impact of critically-conscious hip-hop music on students throughout North America by analyzing research data collected by other scholars. Next, it will focus on specific artists or songs that help support my argument on the advantages of combining hip-hop with education. Lastly, the chapter will include my reflective hip-hop muse that transcends popular assumptions of hip-hop music and its listeners.

In Chapter Five, I provide an insight into the social, political, and educational implications of my thesis. My goal is to leave readers with an understanding of the current issue in order to reflect upon further changes in the curriculum to facilitate equitable classrooms. I also include sections for discussion and recommendations to promote ongoing exposure to the idea of critically-conscious hip-hop and education.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this chapter is to highlight key themes in existing literature that assist with developing a framework for examining critically-conscious hip-hop as a form of youth expression and to argue for its uses as a literary tool for learning within the context of classrooms. Investigating existing literature provides me with an opportunity to promote new directives for Canadian school curricula that acknowledge the positive impact that critically-conscious hip-hop can have on disengaged high school students. I will incorporate research literature on hip-hop and education from theorists such as Gloria Ladson-Billings (1998, 2011) and also consider the research of scholars like Dei et al. (1997), McNeil (2006), and Rodriguez (2009). To familiarize readers with concepts in my thesis, Table 1 outlines themes which are presented by the theorists I discuss who are located in the field of education. Table 1 is a tool for making connections between key theorists and examining the progress some have made in intertwining hip-hop with education. This table is also useful for contextualizing each theorist's area of study before considering how it fits into my own thesis. Each individual source contains an abundance of information that is practical for understanding student disengagement, hip-hop discourse, and intersectionality. For the purpose of organizing my findings, I created a separate column which provides an overview of each theorist's work. The last column outlines the themes which I have chosen to comment on in this chapter. My decision to choose only a few themes from each source does not deem other themes inconsequential; instead, many of the themes in each source overlap and are explored in relation to hip-hop experts such as Ibrahim (2003). Essentially, all of the identified key theorists' work is beneficial for formulating the framework of my own work and practice.

Table 1

Key Theorists and Related Themes

Theorist	Date	Key Themes in Literature	Themes Discussed In Thesis
Dei, Mazzuca, McIsaac, & Zine	1997	-the social construction of a drop-out; -dropping out vs. fading out; -dropping out vs. pushed out; -student disengagement and fading out are facilitated through teachers' perceptions and educational policies; -explores the Euro-centricity of educational spaces; -normalization of Euro-centricity within a distorted historical and contemporary learning context;	-exploring how the cultural deficit theory impacts student engagement; -exploring the unwritten code and its implications on student engagement; -dropping out as a gradual disengagement process; -racial identities and their susceptibility to negative presumptions; -self-esteem and internalized oppression;
Forell, K.	2006	-intricate relationship between hip-hop and schooling; -interpretive tensions between educators, administrators, and minority youth; -reluctance of teachers to build the curriculum around student culture and interests; -hip-hop pedagogy through writing, self-reflection, and a critical language; -hip-hop as resistance to dominant discourse;	-exploring rap as a legitimate literacy tool; -one-dimensional understanding of hip-hop; -exploring hip-hop and other forms of media (movies and music); -rap music and the general sense of moral panic; -constructing rap/rappers as the evil other; -co-constructing courses with students to promote equity in classrooms;
Hall, M.	2009	-the history of embracing hip-hop as a tool for educating minority youth; -hip-hop and culture as public pedagogy; -exploring current non-profit organizations embracing hip-hop as an educational tool; -an overview of current initiatives being taken in North America to incorporate hip-hop into classroom pedagogy;	-exploring examples in popular culture that emphasize hip-hop pedagogy; -hip-hop and its permissive boundaries. Race does not place restrictions on *who* can engage with hip-hop pedagogy; -exploring hip-hop as more than just music; -intersecting hip-hop with school culture, identity, and social activism;
Irizarry, G. J.	2009	-developing social cohesion within classrooms; -interviews with teachers to discuss culturally relevant teaching and learning; -teaching from a disenfranchised perspective; -enhancing literacy skills through culturally responsive assignments;	-exploring the notion of representin' as both a teaching tool and interpretive framework; -exploring reflective writing as a process for reengaging students; -exploring teaching methods that create/maintain relevancy in the lives of youth;

Ladson-Billings, G.	1998/ 2011	-culturally relevant teacher assessments and cultural competence within classrooms; -teaching with sociopolitical consciousness; -making learning more meaningful through relevant examples of students' backgrounds and experiences; -teaching as a way of helping students to cope with social realities intersecting with race, class, and gender; -marketability of youth culture and hip-hop culture; -exploring the misrepresentations of hip-hop; -how students are impacted by glorified images of hip-hop (violence, misogyny, and homophobia); -exploring our own outlook on minority students in schools;	-exploring culture as more than just race, ethnicity, and language; -differentiating homes and communities from schools and classrooms; -exploring how cultural competence works in classrooms; -the effects of educating through an assimilationist lens; -outlining the issue of social and cultural incompetency within classrooms and amongst educators; -exploring educators' surface understanding of other cultures; -putting theory into practice by integrating students' identities into everyday classroom dialogue;
McNeil, J.	2006	-characteristics of the social reconstructionist curriculum; -Freire's approach to social reconstructionism through conscientization; -teachers' role in classrooms that adopt social reconstructionism; -educational reform and its impact on social and economic development;	-social reconstructionism as an agent for change in schools and communities; -critical theory against reproduced knowledge; -transformative knowledge vs. static knowledge within classrooms; -limitations of social reconstructionism in schools;
Ornstein, Pajak, & Ornstein	2011	-philosophy as a basis for curriculum orientation; -goals and objectives for an inclusive curriculum; -overview of perrenialism and essentialism; -looking at which curriculum philosophy currently guides the majority of educational curricula throughout North America;	-social reconstructionism and the role of the teacher along with related curriculum trends; -overview of educational philosophies; -overview of contemporary philosophies; -the hazards of traditional educational philosophy; -educational philosophy as an agent for student development through personal interests;
Rodriguez, F. L.	2009	-a historical inquiry into hip-hop culture and rap; -exploring hip-hop discourse as alternative education for low-income (minority) youth; -dialoguing with youth to engage in critical discourse involving hip-hop and popular culture; -knowledge of hip-hop as a form of cultural capital;	-hip-hop as an enabler which allows students to identify with a cultural group; -the creation of a figurative space between students and hip-hop music; -communicating an existence to the world through writing and reflection; -the challenge with legitimizing hip-

			-including the educator in the process of conjoining hip-hop with education;	hop dialogue in schools from an institutionalized standpoint;
Solomon, R.	2004		-comparing contemporary education/schools to the "Babylon System"; -schooling as a socialization process to create and maintain White normalcy; -Black identities in North American schools; -the problem with zero tolerance policies and the "one size fits all" approach to educating; -exploring "cultural power" as a counter-hegemonic tool for combating the institutional power of schools;	-dismantling the Babylon System by employing teaching styles that promotes student engagement through the recognition of their individual identities; -exploring sub-cultural forms of behaviour and ways of life as a response to imposed control; -the displacement of troubled youth from schools as a result of zero tolerance policies; -re-establish schools as safe spaces through alternative discourse within classrooms;
Taylor, C., & Taylor, V.	2004		-mainstream hip-hop and hyper-consumerism; -debunking myths about hip-hop music listeners; -hip-hop is not a monolithic voice; -exploring the role of race in the continuous suppression of hip-hop culture. What other factors influence society to reject hip-hop?; -hip-hop and exposing the silent discourse;	-exploring hip-hop as a youthful expression that has now transformed into a lifestyle; -exploring hip-hop as an anti-monolithic voice or idea; -critically engaging with hip-hop to take part in the raw reflection of life; society's perception of hip-hop as sole blackness;
Thompson, D.	2008		-exploring the mechanics of hip-hop as a method for creating better communication between communities; -B.U.M.P. Records: performance and production program for Bay area youth; -exploring the program and hip-hop culture in general as a tool for digital storytelling; -meaningful collaborations with youth programs; -challenging stereotypes about hip-hop culture through hip-hop programs;	-critically-conscious hip-hop as a tool for better self-communication; -writing verses as an opportunity for self-exploration and fantasy; -building a sense of community through hip-hop and writing; -exploring hip-hop as the raw reflection of stories that often go unheard; -out-of-school hip-hop programs and positive outcomes for youth;

Youth Disengagement

Youth disengagement is a reality within schools across North America and is often regarded as insignificant when compared with achievement levels for accomplished students. Though issues of racism, sexism, and socioeconomic status influence student performance within schools, classroom discourse plays a major role in determining student engagement. One of the more controversial issues arose out of Toronto, Ontario in 2009 when a proposal to construct Black-focused schools was announced for the Greater Toronto Area. While the principles behind the school were aimed at creating culturally relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1992) practices in classrooms, many educators argued that it mirrored historical instances of racial segregation. I am discussing this issue because extensive research has been conducted on the topic of Black-focused schools and the notion of youth disengagement amongst Black students. According to Gordon & Zinga (2012), the rationalization of Black-focused schools has more to do with an alternative curriculum rather than just a "Black way of learning" (p. 4). These proposed schools were intended to challenge the conventional educational environment by organizing themselves around a holistic model of communal principles while making the totality of Black-lived experiences relevant to all parts of the curriculum in order to foster the social, physical, spiritual, and academic development of students. (Dei, 2005)

In relation to my research on critically-conscious hip-hop and education, the proposal for Black-focused schools serves as a model for furthering academic development amongst disadvantaged students by creating and maintaining culturally relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1992) classrooms. Looking beyond the traditionalist method of teaching through a

Eurocentric lens, the support for alternative education is an attempt to reengage students through a social reconstructionist learning environment that includes them.

Recognizing Student Disengagement Through Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Ladson-Billings' (1992) description of culturally relevant teaching practices outlines the importance of a social reconstructionist approach that involves matching school culture with student culture to promote engagement. The process of culturally relevant teaching overlaps with social reconstructionism in which lesson plans are designed not only to "fit the school culture to the students' culture, but also to *use* student culture as the basis for helping students understand themselves and others, structure social interactions, and conceptualize knowledge" (p. 314). Although schools present several cultures, experiences, religions, and histories, the purpose of my thesis is to promote hip-hop in schools as an important facet of student culture.

Ladson-Billings' (1992) research on culturally relevant pedagogy highlights how teachers can develop curricula by appreciating each student as a member of a specific sub-culture. In her research findings, Ladson-Billings states that "all children can learn...maybe not every subject matter to the same degree but all children can find a link that connects to another and so I don't give up on anyone" (p. 318). Ladson-Billings' study is relevant to my thesis because it illustrates a way to incorporate conversations outside of school into classrooms. A similar approach can be taken into consideration when critically-conscious hip-hop is used in classrooms as a means for triggering dialogue between disengaged students. The dialogue, in this case, often requires students to interpret the significance of what they are hearing. As a result, "value depends on understanding [and interpretation]" (Lane, 1989, p. 7). Similar to the interpretation of visual art or literary works, critically-

conscious hip-hop commands a process of interpretation and conceptualization for the purpose of adjoining hip-hop discourse with personal experiences (Lane, 1989). The educator's role is to provide students with an opportunity to examine critical discourse through culturally relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1992) teaching.

Discourse must be contextualized in order to understand its significance inside and outside of schools. Multiple discourses exist in our society and they are often explored within different realms such as courthouses, classrooms, and amongst men and women (Delpit, 1992). Gee (1990) defines discourse as an "identity kit" (p. 1) and classifies Discourse (with a capital "D") separate from discourse (with a lowercase "d"):

> At any moment we are using language we must say or write the right thing in the right way while playing the right social role and (appearing) to hold the right values, beliefs and attitudes. What is important is not language, and surely not grammar, but *saying, writing, doing, being, valuing, and believing combinations*. These combinations I will refer to as 'Discourses', with a capital 'D', are ways of being in the world, or forms of life which integrate words, acts, values, beliefs, attitudes, social identities, as well as gestures, glances, body positions and clothes. (p. 1)

Gee's explanation of dominant Discourse is important to consider within the context of education because it comments on normalized schooling environments where smaller, localized discourses are overlooked. Gee (1990) also suggests that dominant Discourse is a "socially accepted association among ways of using language and thinking" (p. 2). Dominant Discourse, then, legitimizes hegemony by homogenizing ways of being, acting, and thinking among members of society. Delpit (1992), however, questions the validity of Gee's analysis on discourse within a classroom context:

> Gee's argument suggests a dangerous kind of determinism as flagrant as that
> espoused by the geneticists: Instead of being locked into "your place" by your genes,
> you are now locked hopelessly into a lower-class status by your Discourse. Clearly
> such a stance can leave a teacher feeling powerless to effect change, and a student
> feeling hopeless. (p. 298)

In this case, it is important to consider *whose* values, principles, and beliefs are secured within schools. For Delpit (1992), Discourse within schools generates obstacles for students from disregarded or undervalued primary discourses. As a result, a student's home, social environment, and political understanding is distorted by a school Discourse grounded in authority.

My stance on the interaction between big 'D' and little'd' discourses in the classroom is guided by the belief that big 'D' Discourse and little 'd' discourse are not static. Culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1992) is demonstrated through an educator's ability to accept identities, experiences, and knowledge as both immeasurable and multifaceted. Critically-conscious hip-hop presents challenges to big 'D' discourse through its resistance to hegemony. In using critically conscious hip-hop, teachers can participate in reshaping big 'D' dominant discourse by integrating out-of-school little 'd' discourse into critical conversations. Looking exclusively at North America, Gee's (1990) description of D/discourse as "values and viewpoints" (p. 2) stipulates that student success is a by-product of normativity in relation to acquisition of big 'D' Discourse. Like Delpit's (1992) analysis of discourses in classrooms, I agree that all students need access to dominant Discourses in order to "(legally) have access to economic power [and in turn] transform dominant Discourses for liberatory purposes" (p. 300). This process, according to

Henry Louis Gates (quoted in Martin, 1990) is called "changing the joke and slipping the yoke" (p. 204); in which dominant Discourse is embraced for the purpose of critiquing it, deconstructing it, and making liberating proposals for the betterment of oppressed groups of people.

Critically-conscious hip-hop artists combine language with discourse as a way of life to channel hope through music that in turn critiques dominant Discourse. Hip-hop is ritualistic in the sense that students' ways of *being* or embodying hip-hop culture is "an expression of politics, moments of identification and desire" (Ibrahim, 2003, p. 58). I argue for a shift towards acknowledging *all* discourses (whether big 'D' or little 'd') as fluid, rather than static or categorized on the basis of socioeconomic status. The idea of looking at *who* fits into which discourse contradicts the goal of considering *how* someone can engage with discourse to improve our educational system.

The notion of engaging with discourse for the purpose of creating equitable classrooms is essential to Villegas & Lucas' (2002) research on preparing culturally responsive teachers. Villegas & Lucas' work deviates from Henry Louis Gates' theory on embracing dominant discourse to critique it. Their work is grounded in the belief that dominant discourse can be eradicated by preparing educators to work within a culturally relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1992) framework through what they identify as sociocultural consciousness. They explain: "sociocultural consciousness, [as] an affirming attitude toward students from culturally diverse backgrounds, [involves] commitment and skills to act as agents of change, constructivist views of learning, learning about students, [and] culturally responsive teaching practices" (Villegas & Lucas, 2002, p. 21). Culturally responsive educators define their pedagogical practices in relation to the knowledge, experiences, and

identities that are represented by their students. Moreover, culturally responsive teachers see *all* students "as learners who already know a great deal and who have experiences, concepts, and languages that can be built on and expanded to help them learn even more" (Villegas & Lucas, 2002, p. 23). If dominant Discourse (Gee, 1990) is an inevitable constituent of classroom culture, then sociocultural consciousness is the tool to combat hegemony in schools by educating teachers and students on the effects of cultural capital. As I pointed out earlier in Table 1, hip-hop researchers like Rodriguez (2009) argue for the inclusion of hip-hop pedagogy because it represents marginalized students' cultural capital. Meritocracy, particularly in schools, is simply a façade for an educational system that untruthfully labels schools as an "opportunity for all, regardless of social background" (Bowles & Gintis, 1976, p. 22). Villegas & Lucas' (2002) analysis of socioculturally conscious educators interrelates with critical educators who use culturally responsive/relevant approaches for teaching and strive to generate equitable change within schools.

For example, James Talbert, a high school teacher in Connecticut, searches for meaningful connections within his classroom to generate student engagement. His pedagogical practice is based on Irizarry's (2009) research on culturally responsive pedagogy and suggests that hip-hop music serves as a link between student interests and the standard curriculum. In this case, the concept of representin' is expressed as a teaching practice that involves student engagement through the recognition of their individual identities. The educators included in Irizarry's research represent urban districts across mid-sized cities within the northeast region of the United States. Talbert states the following about his experience teaching high school students:

> Whenever I was doing a lesson plan, my first responsibility was finding a way to connect whatever it was I was teaching to these kids today. That was the hardest part of teaching for me. Not the hardest but the most involved part of the lesson plan—making that connection. (Irizarry, 2009, p. 501)

The purpose of this approach is to achieve cultural relevance (Ladson-Billings, 1992) amongst students who engage with curriculum discourse. For example, Sara Silver, also a high school teacher, comments on the significance of journals for enhancing literacy skills while creating culturally responsive assignments for students:

> I think children should have opportunities to write about maybe something that they would like to change in the community…making their assignments be socially relevant where they can see themselves as being able to make a difference writing a letter to an editorial or to the mayor. I think that it's really important…everything that is relevant to our kids is relevant to our teaching. (Irizarry, 2009, p. 501)

Not only are Sara Silver's classrooms comprised of students' voices and knowledge, but the experiences shared within the space are reciprocal. Her pedagogical practices are adequately shaped by her students.

As pointed out earlier in my thesis, critically-conscious hip-hop often engages with counter-hegemonic discourse by rejecting White, hegemonic normativity in the curriculum. However, it is imperative to understand that the purpose of critically-conscious hip-hop music is not to engage in a debate over right or wrong approaches to educating. Instead, counter-hegemonic discourse within hip-hop music provides a voice for the oppressed by offering an alternative narrative for social issues and cultural histories. Geronimo Pena, a

high school History teacher also included in Irizarry's research, provides an explanation for

teaching from an opposite angle to spark critical thinking and inquiry amongst students:

> I teach history from the disenfranchised side. I teach not from the wealthy, White,
>
> educated perspective but from the minority perspective—the Native American
>
> perspective, the African American perspective, the Hispanic American perspective. I
>
> show them how things like the Declaration of Independence was written by wealthy
>
> White men, and they made laws for people like themselves. Today, if you look at
>
> who runs the country today, who are they really making laws to help? Rich, well-
>
> educated, White men. (Irizarry, 2009, p. 502)

Pena's statement on the conventional approach to teaching a high school History course

indicates that the suppression of others' experiences and attitudes towards historical events

has contributed to the ongoing oppression of minority groups. In critically-conscious hip-

hop music, rappers are situated in a similar, yet unique position because of two reasons:

their detachment from mainstream hip-hop music provides listeners with an alternative way

of perceiving hip-hop culture, and the important issues addressed within their music

generates critical awareness amongst its listeners. Because the effects of critically-conscious

hip-hop music are twofold, it too can be regarded as an agent for representin' on behalf of

its recipients.

In order to accurately position critically-conscious hip-hop in the context of student

engagement, the act of representin' must extend beyond the borders of simply

acknowledging messages within music. According to Freire (1970), a process of "reflection

and action upon the world" (p. 36) must take place in order to transform it. The acceptance

of the existence of social issues that plague our society today is ultimately the first step for

actively seeking to produce positive change within communities. As a result, advocates for critically-conscious hip-hop music must not be regarded simply as passive listeners. Instead, their role as recipients of meaningful dialogue illustrates their willingness to use critically-conscious hip-hop music as a tool for empowerment in order to enact change. Critically-conscious hip-hop music is an entertaining form of music that concurrently serves as an outlet for promoting critical awareness amongst its listeners. Nevertheless, one of the fundamental challenges that critically-conscious hip-hop endures is that it is somewhat minimized in relation to the significant amount of mass interest in mainstream hip-hop. Evidently, contradicting images projected through the majority of mainstream hip-hop often diminishes the important facets of its conscious counterpart. As a result, it is important to consider the culture of mainstream hip-hop music from the perspective of numerous scholars to gain insight into its problematic homogenization.

Zero Tolerance Policies, *Pushing Out* Students, and Misconceptions About Safe Spaces

The notion of dropping out is commonly defined as a lack of attendance at school. From an alternative standpoint, the term dropping out can also be studied as a phenomenon that takes place amongst students who are physically present within classrooms. In this case, "fading out" (Dei et al., 1997, p. 70) is the process of gradual disengagement amongst students that eventually leads to being pushed out rather than merely dropping out. Dei et al. (1997) argues that the issue of fading out is often characterized by poor class attendance, tardiness, and school policies that only assist with pushing out at-risk students from schools by expelling them. Factors such as socioeconomic status, race, and class are also important to remember within the context of student disengagement in schools.

Oppression is in many cases a systemic force that positions racialized students in a disadvantaged state from an early age. Drug-ridden neighbourhoods, poverty, violence within communities, and racial degradation are genuine areas of concern. The cultural deficit theory, for example, illustrates the evident rift between schools and homes that often leads to gradual student disengagement (Dei et al., 1997). For one particular student in Dei's (1997) research study, issues of abuse at home were perceived by her as out-of-school problems that ultimately infiltrated her school life:

> I didn't think it was advisable for me to bring my personal problems to the authorities at school [...] there was an unwritten code that the school was separate and distinct from the home and that you leave your home problems outside the gate of school [...] sometimes too, because the school system has such low expectations of Black students, you say to yourself, 'Why bother?'. (p. 72)

Dei et al. (1997) identifies the unwritten code cited in the above interview as linked to teachers' preconceived notions of students based on their racial identities. These authors believe that these preconceived notions, coupled with the negative assumptions of minority youth, are in part responsible for student disengagement amongst racialized students. Tupac Shakur once stated: "Who am I to judge another brother only by his cover? I'd be no different than the others" (1991, 9). Tupac's commentary on society's assumptions of racialized youth suggests that the ability to critically examine the underpinnings of the unwritten code (Dei et al., 1997) influences how we treat each other. In this case, educators' (in)tolerance of cultures, racial identities, and ways of life that are not normalized by dominant society plays a crucial role in determining the experiences of students in classrooms.

To highlight the unwritten code (Dei, 1997), Black-focused schools have been conceived as a result of an increase in dropout rates and low-enrolment for post-secondary studies amongst Black students. Though my thesis does not specify hip-hop in education for a particular racial or cultural demographic, it is credited with the ability to engage students to think critically about their position both inside and outside of the classroom. Looking back on how hip-hop culture was ultimately formulated through a struggle for social equity and an audible voice for Black Americans, hip-hop music today is unquestionably a grassroots movement for Black youth. Nonetheless, my proposal to incorporate hip-hop into the curriculum is not aimed solely at Black youth. Along with the emancipatory discourse that is often cited in critically-conscious hip-hop music, the abundance of sociopolitical commentary and references to contemporary culture is valuable for *any* student. More importantly, critically-conscious hip-hop introduces students to issues that would otherwise never be discussed within classrooms. The incentive, then, for students actively engaging with critically-conscious hip-hop discourse, lies in the opportunity to learn effectively through listening, reflecting, and writing.

For scholars like Solomon (2004), the solution to dismantling the Babylon system in schools is through representin'; a term used to describe a teaching style that promotes student engagement through the recognition of their individual identities. The Babylon system is the institutionalized form of learning that mediates "oppression within schools to dominate the socioeconomic, political, legal, and cultural life [of students]" (Solomon, 2004, para. 4). This system, without a doubt, epitomizes hegemony and normativity by endorsing positivist classrooms and pedagogical practices that lack the phenomenon of representin'. A positivist curriculum and teaching approach within schools renders students'

interests and identities as nonexistent. The paradox is that the prevalence of hegemony within the education system interconnects with the abundance of subcultures in schools that seek to combat these active systems of oppression through resistance to the school curriculum. Subcultures, like critically-conscious hip-hop, which counter Eurocentric-based curricula in schools, challenge the element of otherness within schools that "cast new racialized minority immigrants as socio-culturally dislocated, dysfunctional, and deviant in their family, community, and school life" (Solomon, 2004, para. 13). Solomon's research on Black students' experiences of oppression in relation to dominant school authorities also draws a correlation between subcultures like hip-hop and domineering practices within schools:

> To maintain some measure of power and control in their schools and communities, these students develop distinct sub-cultural forms of behaviour as a response to imposed control. What has emerged from the literature is the construction of Blacks as fearful, deviant, socially dysfunctional, non-conformist and a threat to the safety and smooth functioning of the school as a social system. (2004, para. 13)

Schools often overlook the rationale behind subcultures, and instead impulsively disregard them based on their counter-hegemonic elements. As a result, the continual process of disallowing out-of-school experiences is supported by the development of school guidelines such as zero tolerance policies. These types of policies devalue and denigrate students' own discourse and communicative styles that are represented through counter-hegemonic forces like critically-conscious hip-hop; thereby barring their integration into classrooms.

Zero tolerance policies appeal to society (on a surface level) as a positive means to circumvent school violence. However, researchers like Solomon (2004) and Dei (1997)

have challenged this claim by proving that the policy systematically discriminates through stronger disciplinary procedures levelled against racialized youth. As a consequence, the zero tolerance policy was repelled in Ontario in 2007 after the Human Rights Commission stated that the policy was having a "disproportionate impact on racial-minority students and students with disabilities" (CBC News, 2007, para. 2). While Solomon's work further demonstrates the disastrous impact of these disciplinary procedures on Black youth, it confirms Dei's (1997) theory on school policies as a mechanism for pushing students out of schools by effectively hindering their schooling experiences. The process of being pushed out is often characterized by school policies that sustain intolerance for disengaged youth (Dei, 1997). The idea, then, of suspending or expelling students as a form of retaliatory action on behalf of schools successfully limits opportunities for student achievement.

As I outlined earlier in my thesis, historical instances like the crack epidemic during the 1980s have had a lasting impact on communities today. Many of the students incorporated into Dei's (1997) research share similar experiences that echo single-parent families, low-income backgrounds, and an overall lack of social support. These policies, then, are indirectly stipulated for racialized and socioeconomically disadvantaged students. The following excerpt is from Solomon's (2004) work on impractical schooling policies and their superficial value on student life:

- The displacement of troubled youth from the controlled social learning environment of the school to their less controlled neighbourhoods [promotes engagement] in more serious offences. (Ayers et al., 2001, para. 20)
- School discipline policies based on the principles of zero tolerance reinforce Anglo-Eurocentric sensibilities of right and wrong and the authoritative

structures within public education[...]To claim that social justice can be achieved

through the implementation of a so-called unbiased zero tolerance school

discipline policy is to believe that discriminatory practice can be eradicated by

implementing policies that are blind to personal or individual social and/or

cultural contexts[...]Equal treatment in an unequal social and academic

environment is discriminatory. (Jull, 2000, para. 26)

This excerpt emphasizes two key points: how zero tolerance policies contradict every idiom that addresses schools as safe spaces, and how alternative discourse within classrooms can promote engagement in order to evade obstructive forms of discipline in schools. Vavrus & Cole's (2002) study on disciplinary actions within schools further supports the above claims. They argue that "removing a student from class for disrespectful and/or disruptive behavior was a highly subjective and contextualized decision based upon subtle race and gender relations that were not adequately addressed in discipline policies" (Vavrus & Cole, 2002, p. 93). The reality of zero tolerance policies is that disengaged and underprivileged students are overexposed to disciplinary procedures; while students who adapt to an unyielding curriculum are benefitted with never having to experience severe discipline in schools.

The correlation between race relations and disciplinary action within schools is important to consider within the context of education. There are underlying assumptions rooted in many educators' everyday practices that contribute to zero tolerance policies' intrusion upon students' education. Some students have defined these experiences as examples of racial profiling within schools: "Even at school teachers treat you differently...Like if you're a Black kid walking through the hallway...they're expecting you

to cause trouble or be bad" (James & Taylor, 2010, p. 127). The notion of expectations and assumptions based on race, image, and socioeconomic backgrounds suggests that zero tolerance policies are ineffective for determining the root cause of disengagement amongst youth. More importantly, factors such as coolness, hyper-masculinity, and predetermined societal assumptions may potentially enable harmful behaviour for the purpose of emulating an identity constructed by others. Though zero tolerance policies are often centered on issues of abuse, violence, and bullying, they must align with preventative measures for averting harmful situations within schools. Does zero tolerance extend beyond violence and bullying? Is zero tolerance perhaps an obscure way of suggesting that schools are ultimately intolerant of anything that does not reassert their traditional approaches to educating youth? In this case, critically-conscious hip-hop must be examined as a channel for disengaged students to connect with school. I argue that this can be achieved through a social reconstructionist approach like culturally relevant pedagogy.

Critically-conscious hip-hop can most definitely be regarded as a vehicle for furthering student development through critical discourse that transcends Eurocentric-based classrooms. For example, if low-income backgrounds or crime ridden neighbourhoods are integral to a student's identity, then critically-conscious hip-hop is the quintessential tool for understanding these social, economic, and political realities. Critically-conscious hip-hop is interpretive, yet explanatory for those who are engaged with it. It does not dictate which path to take; it demonstrates how our paths are often influenced by factors beyond our control. Zero tolerance policies, then, are an example of how students' paths in schools are enclosed within an authoritative structure that subjectively differentiates right from wrong.

This policy, then, when examined from a critical standpoint, suggests that it is simply a method for denying student access to out-of-school dialogue and interests.

Curriculum Philosophy

The incorporation of critically-conscious hip-hop into contemporary curricula echoes the principles of social reconstructionism in which "students use their interests to help find solutions to social problems" (McNeil, 2006, p. 25). The philosophical foundation, however, is far more complex when numerous education philosophies are studied within a comparative analysis. For example, perennialism, a philosophy grounded in realism and knowledge, contradicts the perspective that social reconstructionism entails. Perennialism focuses on "educating the rational person [and] focuses on past and permanent studies" (Ornstein & Hunkins, 1998, p. 56). The role of the educator involves "helping students to think rationally [based on] classical subjects [and] literary analysis" (Ornstein & Hunkins, 1998, p. 56). The problem, however, is that education philosophies like perennialism ground their practice in rationality without explaining what rationality truly is. Is the view on rationality amongst educators determined or influenced by gender, age, sexual orientation, physical appearance, or race? The perception of rationality also closely fits in with how power relations within classrooms influence pedagogical practices. Education philosophies like essentialism, which overlap with perennialism, emphasize the role of the educator through a hierarchal lens. For example, Ornstein & Hunkins (1998) outline the educator as "the authority in his or her field [through the] explicit teachings of traditional values" (p. 56). From a social reconstructionist perspective, the goal to improve classroom practices through strengthened student-teacher relations is unattainable in classrooms that are grounded in perennialism and essentialism.

The philosophical underpinnings of social reconstructionism interconnect with the characteristics of a culturally relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1992) curriculum; in which student development and education is a result of individual experiences. For social reconstructionists, "the function of the curriculum is to provide each learner with intrinsically rewarding experiences that contribute to personal liberation and development" (McNeil, 2006, p. 5). In the context of self-development through personal interests and experiences, McNeil (2006) indicates that social reconstructionist philosophy in education promotes each student as a "learner [who] has a self that must be uncovered, built up, [and] taught" (p. 5). In my thesis, the self is discussed as a static concept with limited autonomy in schools. A social reconstructionist curriculum embodies critically-conscious hip-hop through a shared understanding of discourse, experiences, and interests that seek uncovering through alternative pedagogical approaches. As a result, social reconstructionism is the compulsory tool for achieving a culturally relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1992) classroom. Improved student-teacher relations, the eradication of traditional education philosophies, and the elimination of homogenization in classrooms are gateways for uncovering the identities of each student. Figure 1 outlines both oppressive curriculum theories that uphold Eurocentric ways of approaching pedagogy and transformative curriculum theories that promote student engagement and cultural relevance within classrooms.
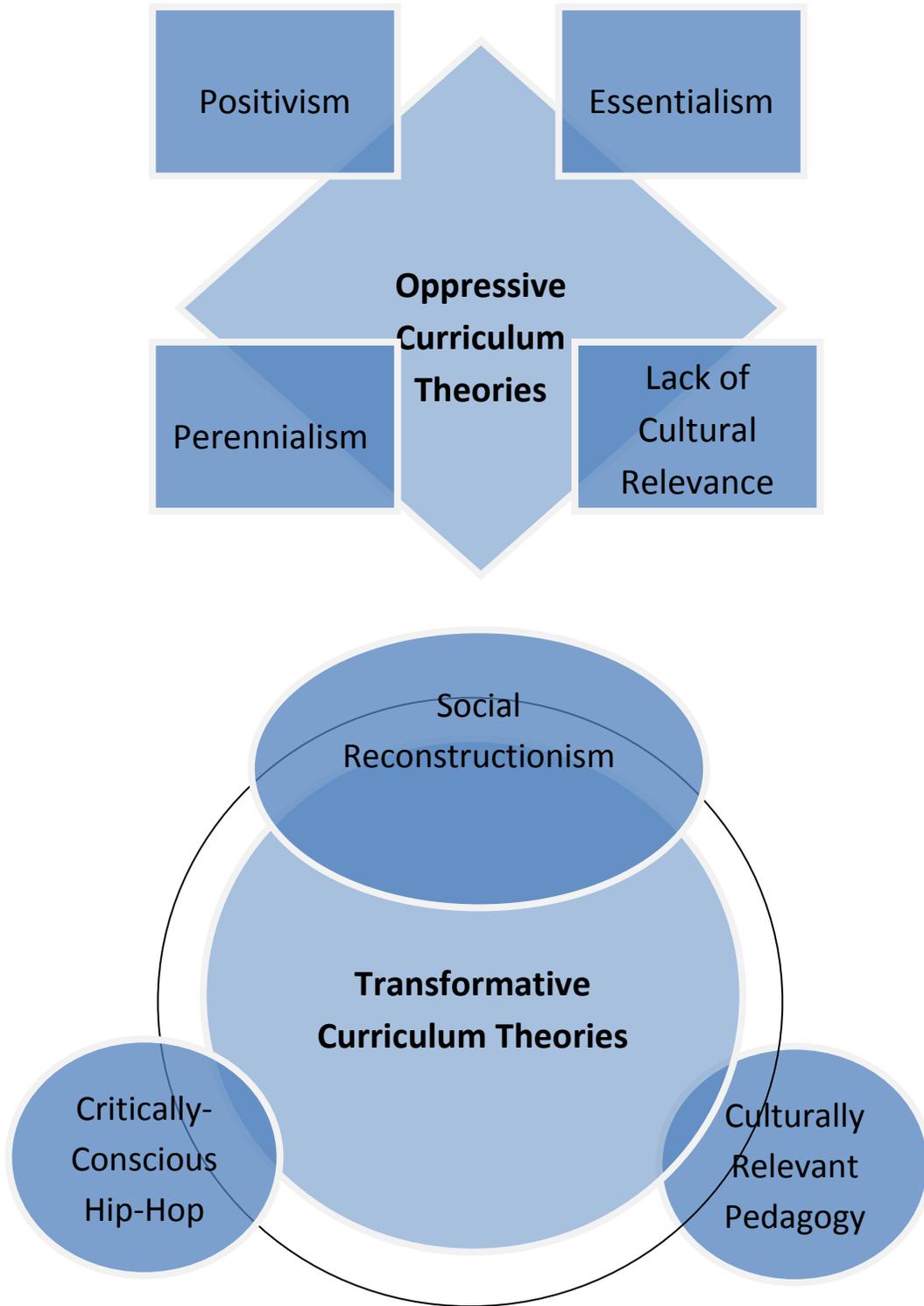
Figure 1. Curriculum Theories.

Critically-conscious hip-hop, then, unearths the voices of students by acting as an agent for critical reflection and social commentary. Attempting to incorporate critically-conscious hip-hop into classrooms without acknowledging the current classroom climate (i.e., educational philosophy) would be ineffective. Educators, along with the classrooms in which they teach, must be open to embracing social reconstructionism in order to implement innovative ways of educating our youth.

Adjusting the Classroom Climate

One of the key approaches to creating a culturally relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1992) classroom includes the recognition for individualism and the need for sociocultural fluidity. In this case, the notion of fluidity is concerned with social and cultural differences as constantly-shifting phenomena. According to Ladson-Billings (2011), there are ongoing distinctions between students, whether socially or culturally, that create vast student interests and multiple learning approaches. We as a Canadian society often assume that culture only encompasses race, ethnicity, and language. However, homes and communities should not be perceived as cultures that work separately from schools and classrooms (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Failing to understand the fluidity of these cultures results in a lack of cultural competence; in which many educators "only possess a surface understanding of culture [which includes] their own" (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 261). Ladson-Billings (1998) provides a vivid description of a culturally relevant classroom:

> Culturally relevant teachers know when to introduce relevant examples from their students' backgrounds and experiences to make learning more meaningful. The goal of fostering cultural competence requires teachers to help raise students' awareness

of prejudice and discrimination as well as their ability to react to and constructively

cope with these negative social realities. (p. 261)

Critically-conscious hip-hop music provides students with an opportunity to learn about issues of social injustice and inequity through an art form that is deemed culturally relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1992). Nevertheless, Hall (2009) explains that scholars were proposing hip-hop-centered school courses as early as the 1990s. Hall (2009) also indicates that even in the widely popular film, *Dangerous Minds* (Simpson & Bruckheimer, 1995), a White, middle-class teacher "used Public Enemy lyrics to successfully teach her students" (p. 86). The representation of a White teacher using hip-hop to engage her students in class does not confirm that hip-hop works within all classrooms. Instead, it is important to consider that the creation of a movie based on hip-hop pedagogy is in fact a constituent of early research on hip-hop and Black youth. In addition to this, preconceived notions of hip-hop as *only* music are challenged by its representation through alternative media.

Hall (2009) notes that although hip-hop has been active for over 30 years and that there are currently over 300 university courses being taught on hip-hop in the United States, the general lack of acknowledgment for hip-hop as a legitimate source for educating youth is disheartening. The marketability of mainstream hip-hop through materialism and hyper-sexualization is perhaps the primary perpetrator for misconceptions of hip-hop culture. However, scholars like Taylor & Taylor (2004) argue that "hip-hop is the latest form of youthful expression for thousands of young people around the world [...] once exclusively related to rap music, this form of expression has now become a lifestyle" (p. 210). In order to understand how youthful expression is in fact a product of self-exploration and identity formation through critical reflection, an awareness of the real, purposeful agents of

critically-conscious hip-hop must be generated to counteract the strong presence of its mainstream counterpart. Regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status, hip-hop has inevitably transformed into a global identity that seeks acknowledgement from the field of education.

By considering the general absence of cultural competence (Ladson-Billings, 1998) within schools, how can educators make learning more relevant for students? How can we convince disengaged students to perceive their time in the classroom as worthwhile? Rodriguez (2009) suggests that a culture like hip-hop enables students to identify with a particular cultural group that allows them to communicate their existence to the world. A dialogue, then, is established between students and hip-hop; resulting in a figurative space for youth to express themselves (Rodriguez, 2009). The notion of creating a figurative space for expression is important to consider within the context of school culture because it allows students to momentarily escape from the confines of daily life. With regards to hip-hop culture as a key for better (self) communication, Thompson (2008) states the following:

> In the mechanics of hip-hop culture we find the keys to better communication between communities and ourselves. Song writing gives the artists space to vent or the ability to fantasize and explore one's self. At the same time, it allows the listener who might be going through something similar know that they are not alone. Making hip-hop builds community. For young people, the process of completing a hip-hop piece aids in building a stronger sense of self worth. (p. 155)

Song and verse writing within hip-hop is not limited to sociopolitical issues that impact students' everyday lives. Writing, also a facet of self-exploration, is often bolstered by desires to attain personal growth through accomplishments (Thompson, 2008).

Rodriguez (2009) insists that the dialogue between students and hip-hop is constantly reprimanded by school officials. Perhaps the misconceptions about hip-hop as primarily a misogynistic and violent culture contribute to its lack of acknowledgement in the field of education. Yet, Rodriguez (2009) argues that educators' challenges with "developing new ways of teaching, learning, knowing, and constructing new knowledge" (p. 2) can be alleviated through the medium of hip-hop. Hip-hop does not exclusively maintain its relevance with students in classrooms because it also works to develop "new frames of references that transcend the limits of existing concepts, theories, and ideologies" (Rodriguez, 2009, p. 3). All forms of hip-hop music can be integrated into classrooms to achieve contrasting results. Looking at unconstructive forms of hip-hop that degrade women can be examined for the purpose of achieving dialogue on gender inequity issues within classrooms. Discussing issues in hip-hop that are outright offensive does not justify their existence; instead, dialogue operates as an enabler for critical reflection and critical awareness.

The problem, according to Low (2009), is the one-dimensional approach of looking at hip-hop culture. Low (2009) argues that focusing exclusively on hyper-sexualized images and violent representations within hip-hop is problematic for two reasons: the same detrimental images present within other forms of media are overlooked, and the one-dimensional view of hip-hop culture creates an unfair sense of moral panic amongst educators (p. 195). Taylor & Taylor (2004) also comment on the problem of classifying all of hip-hop culture as vulgar by stating that "it would be wise to first of all remember that hip-hop is not a monolithic voice or idea. There are many vestiges of the originating theme derived from early rap music and break dancing" (p. 211). Although I am focusing primarily

upon critically-conscious hip-hop music for my own thesis, I urge educators to examine hip-hop culture in the way they view movie genres. For youth, specific forms of hip-hop music such as critically-conscious, underground, or political rap provides them with the opportunity to take part in the raw reflection of life (Taylor & Taylor, 2004).

Alan Sitomer (2007), an English teacher working with low-income inner-city youth in California, has discovered a way of using hip-hop to discover the deeper meanings in classic English text. Sitomer (2007) explains his pedagogical practices with the following statement:

> Of course, all the lyrics taught in class are free of homophobia, misogyny, profanity, and violence. This isn't MTV, this is a classroom. I believe in validating students and their interests. If you diminish their interests, you diminish them—and then you'll never reach them. (p. 49)

By uniting hip-hop with English literature, Sitomer substantially increases student engagement and creates an environment where both the educator and student are learning from one another. Sitomer's teaching approach intersects with Ibrahim's (2003) research on student identities that are influenced by society and in turn shape their linguistic and cultural understanding. For some students, studying hip-hop is more about speaking, being, and acting than mastering literary techniques (Ibrahim, 2003). This process has more to do with developing an identity than understanding the implications of social commentary. Perhaps the more important factor in culturally relevant pedagogy is defining how society's perceptions shape individual identities (Ibrahim, 2003). Educators, like Sitomer, who are truly passionate about their own pedagogical practices, must also examine hip-hop culture through both society's lens and a sociocultural lens to consider its implications on student

development. A sociocultural lens does not only entail socially relevant examples in teaching practices, but also the ability to foster student development by acknowledging student identities outside of classrooms. Racism, sexism, classism, and poverty are stark realities for those who experience it. The true benefit that arises out of recognizing the reality of these issues is an organic unity between educators and students.

Hip-Hop as a Literacy Practice for Youth

One of the central themes in the research literature and in my thesis is the relationship between hip-hop music and literacy practices. Researchers such as Ruby M. Gourdine (2011) question whether hip-hop can operate as a literary tool within schools to assist students with their reading, writing, and comprehension skills. Forell (2006) thinks it is important to look beyond the three elements of literacy listed above, and insists that "it is not simply the ability to read and write but rather the creative, contextualized acts---ways of knowing, thinking, being, and valuing---that are capable of generating change" (p. 28). If writing is a vital component of language, Forell (2006) argues that "rap is a legitimate literacy tool with the added benefit that it addresses the social, economic, and political position that today's students occupy" (p. 30). With rap operating as a language-based, socially-conscious practice, Paul (2000) states that the combination of these two elements creates cultural synchronization; in which there is a "harmony established between the cultural systems of schools, diverse groups of learners, and the communities from which those learners come" (p. 247). Fulfilling educational requirements (set out by the school curriculum) through a learning approach that embraces cultural relevance (Ladson-Billings, 1992) is beneficial for both educators and students.

According to Scherpf (2001), the problem with integrating rap into classrooms is that "much of the rap that has achieved mainstream, commercial success lacks political, racial, and social consciousness" (p. 85). As a result, Moje (2000) highlights the reasoning behind the disapproval of hip-hop as a genuine approach to learning by stating the following:

> Everyday literacy practices of young adults [in hip-hop] are rarely viewed as tools by administrators, instructors, and other prominent figures within the academy, rather they are viewed as acts of deviance that are meaningless or, in a worst case scenario, destructive. (p. 654)

At first glance, the rejection of hip-hop culture as a tool for learning is caused by an inclination towards conventional methods for educating students (i.e., standardized testing and textbook-learning). However, Meacham (2002) insists that the rejection of hip-hop in schools is quite simply a way to assure that hegemony and sociocultural norms stay unchallenged within classrooms: "rap as a literacy practice can become a way of adding levels to your identity to see what's happening to you so you can navigate your way through the system that was meant to enslave you" (p. 13). Not only can students reap the benefits from writing and self-reflection, but they can also develop independent identities that enable them to undertake a multi-faceted approach towards thinking.

Morgan (2002) outlines how hip-hop can teach students the same material they would otherwise learn through conventional curricula:

> Rap can serve as a teaching and discussion tool as instructors focus on the tense, mood, voice, and aspect of hip-hop songs to facilitate discussions about stylistic and creative choices in writing. The incorporation of rap into English instruction allows

students to expand their semantic realms, explore the worlds of symbolism, and

investigate orthographic and dialectic representations of words. (p. 32)

In order to incorporate hip-hop culture into the school curriculum, a compromise must take place between educators and students. For example, Forell (2006) insists that course syllabuses be co-constructed to assist with creating a culturally relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1992) environment for students. Forell (2006) also argues that an official introduction of hip-hop into classrooms is unnecessary because "it's already there--- [it] simply requires recognition, celebration, and incorporation into formal activities" (p. 31). Jordan (2005) suggests that students should be given an opportunity to provide themselves with their own course material in order to facilitate discussion on literacy practices.

To overcome the stringency of a school curriculum, it is important to consider the research that has been conducted on hip-hop (as relevant pedagogy) and literacy. For example, Ladson-Billings (1992) encourages educators to move away from the assimilationist approach to teaching and insists that the "one-size fits all" (p. 314) approach is irrational and unrealistic. In her research on culturally relevant pedagogy and African American students, she states the following:

Assimilationist teachers are primarily concerned with maintaining the status quo rather than helping students learn to challenge it [...] the more subtle, insidious message they transmit is one that has been transmitted for many generations--- "Don't get out of your place". (p. 315)

Although Ladson-Billings focuses primarily upon African American youth and a noncompliant curriculum, it is helpful for understanding how Eurocentric ideals in schools place limitations on students who want to explore themselves and their social environment.

Perhaps a co-constructed curriculum can alleviate the demands of an incompetent curriculum. As Jordan (2005) insists, educators need to acknowledge the presence of hip-hop culture within their classroom instead of disregarding it in hopes of eliminating it.

Summary

While many educators are aware of the lack of cultural relevance (Ladson-Billings, 1992) in classrooms, an active approach must be taken to eradicate the assimilationist method for teaching students. As Ladson-Billings (1992) suggests, "culturally relevant teaching must be put into action" (p. 314) to reap the benefits of a culturally relevant curriculum. As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, the classroom climate must be adjusted in order to embrace cultural differences. At the same time, hip-hop culture and educational curricula must be acknowledged as two interchangeable entities that coalesce with one another to create cultural relevance (Ladson-Billings, 1992) and critical-consciousness amongst students. Ladson-Billings (1998) highlights the notion of distorted efforts amongst educators to address the issue of cultural incompetence by insisting that many educators only possess a surface understanding of cultures other than their own. However, it is important to note that a surface understanding of cultures accompanied by culturally relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1992) examples can potentially lead to healthier classroom dynamics between students and teachers.

In order for critical thinking and productive discussions to take place in schools, educators must first recognize the importance of cultures such as hip-hop in order to let students embrace a sense of belonging within classrooms. Educators must dedicate their time to getting to know their students as individuals by exploring their personal interests. Educators can then create an inclusive blueprint for understanding how students' interests

can be incorporated into classroom discussion and academic material. Lastly, as Ladson-Billings (1998) suggests, educators must put theory into practice by integrating their inclusive blueprint into everyday classroom conversation. Of course, this conceptualization of an ideal classroom may read as an effortless task. However, the work and dedication involved with creating a culturally relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1992) classroom is strenuous and involves a culturally competent educator to understand that the process is gradual.

When we think about hip-hop and its benefits for students, critics are quick to dismiss it as a violent, hyper-sexual, and irrelevant form of expression. Moreover, the homogenization of hip-hop as a monolithic voice has unfairly emptied the culture of any perceivable value within the field of education. For those of us who are familiar with hip-hop culture, there are mass amounts of written word, spoken word, and songs that correlate with the lives of students searching for an outlet to express their feelings of despair, anger, and happiness. In a sense, then, critically-conscious hip-hop must be regarded in the same way that 18th century poetry is favoured within classrooms. If language apparatus is embodied in critically-conscious hip-hop music through symbolism and imagery, surely we can examine hip-hop as a literacy practice (Morgan, 2002). Aside from considering critically-conscious hip-hop as a tool for language, Ladson-Billings (1998) outlines how students' understanding of social issues (i.e., racism, poverty) must be accompanied by their ability to cope with the effects of these realities. In this case, much of the content within critically-conscious hip-hop music delves into everyday situations which students can potentially relate to. As a result, critically-conscious hip-hop music acts as an avenue for self-expression and validation for students by accepting that their own position within society mirrors someone else's.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

My research is a combination of critical discourse analysis (CDA) and critical race theory (CRT). CDA allows me to construct a comprehensive framework for understanding how (group) relations of power, language, and social commentary act as components for critically-conscious hip-hop. For example, consider the restraints placed on language and social commentary by social status; where social power (and the abuse of this power) contributes to social control. Critically-conscious hip-hop is both a form of self-expression and resistance to these power relations. As such, I also examine issues within critically-conscious hip-hop discourse through a CRT lens. These two combined lenses provide a methodological approach for understanding hip-hop lyrics within a sociopolitical context.

In Chapter Four of my thesis, I incorporate my hip-hop muse from high school that is examined through CDA and CRT. I use this approach in order to make sense of my writing from high school. My hope is that we as educators can at least consider the importance of critically-conscious hip-hop music as part of the normalized classroom curriculum. The rationale for using it in high schools is that it can provide the means to develop critical thinking skills amongst learners and engage students with learning elements of social commentary that lead to critical awareness. I argue that the process of engagement can transpire between educators and students in classrooms through students' written reflections, discussions on social issues that are reflected upon within hip-hop music, and the examination of how critical discourse within critically-conscious hip-hop helps youth to gain a voice to articulate their experiences within society. Figure 2 outlines the methodological design of my thesis and illustrates how my research methodology combined with curriculum theory and my hip-hop muse engaged with critically-conscious hip-hop.
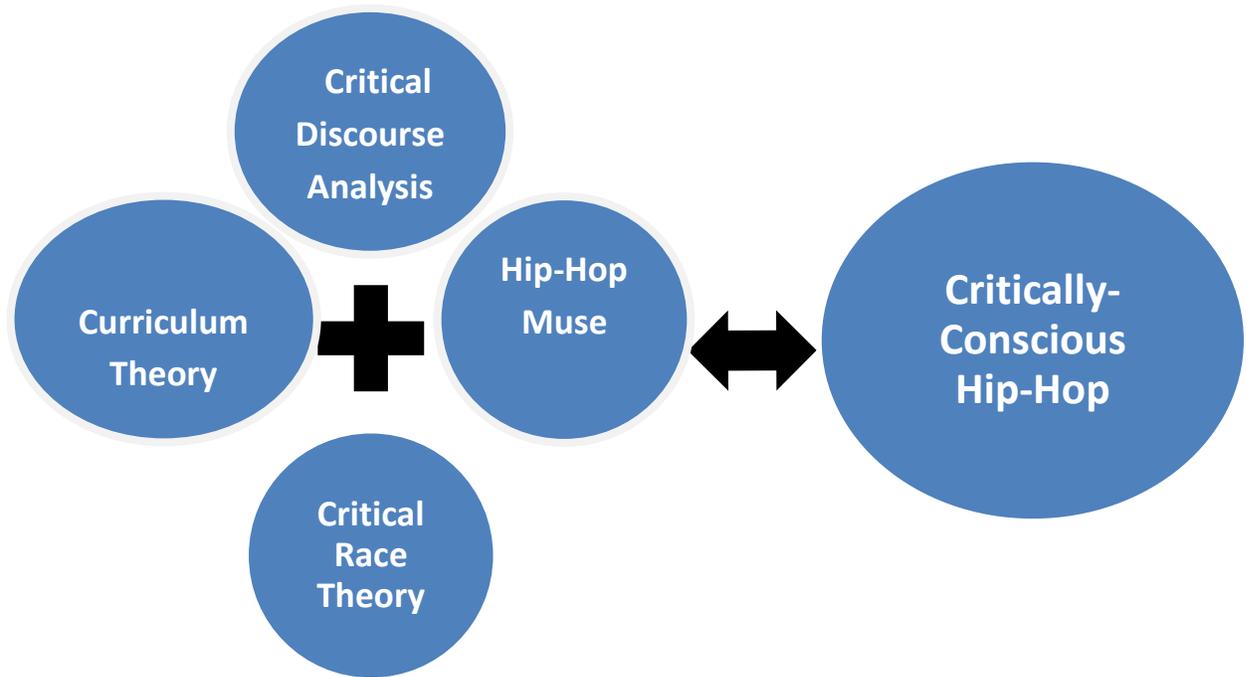
Figure 2. Methodological Design.

Research Methodological Design: Critical Discourse Analysis

Teun A. van Dijk (1995) states that CDA has "become the general label for a special approach to the study of text and talk" (p. 17). However, van Dijk (1995) notes that CDA is a complex form of discourse analysis that may or may not include the following tenets:

It is problem- or issue-oriented, rather than paradigm-oriented. Any theoretical and methodological approach is appropriate as long as it is able to effectively study relevant social problems, such as those of sexism, racism, colonialism, and other forms of social inequality. CDA does not characterize a school, a field or a sub discipline of discourse analysis, but rather an explicitly critical approach, position or stance of studying text and talk. CDA studies (may) pay attention to all levels and dimensions of discourse, via grammar (phonology, syntax, semantics), style, rhetoric, schematic organization, speech acts, and those of interaction, among others. When studying the role of discourse in society, CDA especially focuses on relations of power, dominance and inequality and the ways these are reproduced or resisted by social group members through text and talk. (pp. 17-18)

As a result, critical discourse analysts take "explicit position, and thus want to understand, expose, and ultimately resist social inequality" (van Dijk, 1993, p. 352). For van Dijk, CDA is the "social cognition and personal cognition that mediates between society and discourse [and] defines social cognition as the system of mental representations and processes of group members" (Sheyholislami, 2001, p. 3).

Critical discourse analysts place emphasis on the "intersection of language and social structure" (Duff & Zappa-Hollman, 2011, p. 3). Similar to van Dijk's interpretation of CDA as a model for interpreting discourse through social cognition, Fairclough (1992)

defines CDA by focusing specifically on the relationship between discourse and social practices:

> [CDA] aims to systematically explore often opaque relationships of causality and determination between (a) discursive practices, events and texts, and (b) wider social and cultural structures, relations and processes; to investigate how such practices, events and texts arise out of and are ideologically shaped by relations of power and struggles over power; and to explore how the opacity of these relationships between discourse and society is itself a factor in securing power and hegemony. (p. 135)

Similarly, the power struggle within social groups operates as a form of (counter) hegemonic engagement in which the transmittance of social discourse is controlled by the elite. These forces of control are manifest through the different genres represented by hip-hop, such as underground rap, gangsta rap, and hip-pop; where social resistance amongst hip-hop artists is not always guaranteed. This pattern is also reflective of mainstream hip-hop culture in which the exploitation of women is either ignored or confronted by critically-conscious hip-hop artists.

Specific levels of discourse analysis are also important to consider for examining the reproduction or resistance of topics such as social and gender inequality. A micro-level of analysis may include the use of language, discourse, and verbal interaction (van Dijk, 1993). A macro-level of analysis may incorporate social power, dominance, hegemony, and inequality (van Dijk, 1993). van Dijk (1993) illustrates how in everyday interaction and experience, "the macro and micro level (and intermediary mesolevels) form one unified whole" (p. 354). For example:

A racist speech in parliament is discourse at the microlevel of social interaction in the specific situation of a debate, but at the same time may enact or be a constituent part of legislation or the reproduction of racism at the macrolevel. There are several ways to analyze and bridge these levels, and thus to arrive at a unified critical analysis [which includes] members-groups, actions-process, context-social structure, [and] personal and social cognition. (van Dijk, 1993, p. 355)

In this case, my research on the lyrics of critically-conscious hip-hop artists would be defined as discourse at the microlevel. However, the acknowledgement of social inequity (through the songs) inherent in contemporary society can be best described as discourse at the macrolevel. The combination of these two levels illustrates the notion of discourse as a fluid concept rather than a static one. As a result, the interchangeability between the two levels of discourse is determined by the issues they address.

Research in Action: How to do Critical Discourse Analysis

Fairclough and Wodak (1997) describe CDA as a form of social action that is often "interpretive and explanatory" (pp. 271-280). CDA focuses on addressing social issues by bridging discourse and interpretation to create social action. According to van Dijk (1995), acknowledging the existence of issues like sexism and racism is the first step in engaging with CDA. However, van Dijk (1995) insists that the most important facet of CDA is to detail *how* these forms of inequality are "expressed, enacted, legitimated and reproduced by text and talk" (p. 19). CDA is distinctive because it offers more than one approach or theory to work with in order to understand the relationship between power, discourse, and social issues. Ruth Wodak (2011) summarizes the mechanics of CDA and discusses its capability of engaging in critical thinking and critical analysis:

CDA has never been and has never attempted to be or to provide one singular or

specific theory. Neither is one specific methodology characteristic of research in

CDA. Quite the contrary; studies in CDA are multifarious, derived from quite

different theoretical backgrounds, oriented towards different data and

methodologies. (p. 50)

For critical discourse analysts like van Dijk (1993), using CDA as a tool for research

requires their "explicit awareness of their role in society" (p. 352) and an understanding of

how their role is "inherently part of and influenced by social structure, and produced in

social interaction" (p. 352). In essence, critical discourse analysis demands the researcher to

develop an understanding of embedded social issues in order to collectively mediate the

relationship between discourse and power.

To better understand how CDA ascribes power relations to patterns of discourse,

consider how hegemony plays a role in dictating *who* has access to specific types of

discourse. For example, the general public may only have access to genres of discourse that

encompass conversations with others who have a superficial understanding of bureaucratic

discourse and media discourse (van Dijk, 1995). However, van Dijk (1995) insists that the

elite have granted access to and control over a "vast array of informal as well as public and

institutional forms of text and talk" (p. 20). He argues:

Politicians have control over governmental and parliamentary discourse. Journalists

have control over mass media discourse, and preferential access to a host of other

forms of official text and talk, such as press conferences. Scholars control academic

discourse, such as lessons, courses, and scholarly publications. And judges not only

control who can say what in the courtroom, but also have special access to such

discourse genres as verdicts. (p. 20)

van Dijk's analysis of discourse and power is important to consider within my thesis

because it presents two imperative questions: Who mediates the relationship between

discourse and power within critically-conscious hip-hop? Who is entitled to have access to

this discourse? In van Dijk's analysis of the aims of CDA, he states that "powerful speakers

self-servingly control the minds of others in a way that is in the interest of the powerful"

(1995, p. 22). On the contrary, the goal within my research is to carefully investigate the

counter-hegemonic approach that critically-conscious hip-hop takes in order to promote the

development of critical thinking and critical-consciousness. Consequently, I am interested in

researching how powerful speakers or critically-conscious rappers selflessly influence the

minds of others in ways that are in the interest of the marginalized, voiceless population.

More importantly, I focus on how critically-conscious hip-hop advocates for social equity

and also defies conventional patterns of discourse apparent within mainstream society.

For my thesis, I look specifically at the relationship between the lyrics composed by

critically-conscious hip-hop artists and the social issues they address. When listening to hip-

hop music, we often focus primarily on the music as a whole rather than narrowing in on

discourse. It is important to note that discourse is "not always limited to verbal action […]

but [it] also involves meaning, interpretation and understanding" (van Dijk, 1995, p. 21).

My goal is to closely examine the intricacy of words in critically-conscious hip-hop music

and discuss their social and political significance within contemporary society. By doing so,

not only am I signifying social and cultural relevance in hip-hop culture, but I am critically

analyzing how recurring themes create an environment that highlights notions of power

relations and social inequity. The actual process of linking lyrics with social issues involves an analysis of each artist's song. In Chapter Four, I provide a chart for understanding the major themes in critically-conscious hip-hop music and then study the lyrics of each song to comment on specific lines/verses through a critical race theory (CRT) lens. This particular method for looking at critically-conscious hip-hop lyrics explicates misinterpreted or overlooked songs that do not always overtly engage in sociopolitical critique. I employ the same method for looking at my own hip-hop muse in Chapter Four to determine how themes within my writing interrelate with deep-rooted social issues within schools and communities.

Critical Discourse Analysis and Hip-Hop Music

CDA helps with identifying the relationship between discourse, power, and education. More specifically, CDA assists with understanding the messages incorporated into critically-conscious hip-hop music. Therefore, I researched hip-hop literacy and CDA in order to examine the messages conveyed through language and discourse. I included CDA in my thesis to document and understand *what* knowledge is transmitted to youth through language and discourse and to also argue for the possibility of using this knowledge for curriculum development. Similarly, Storey (2009) conducted research on cartoons, television shows, and hip-hop lyrics to investigate how they empowered and disempowered "particular types of participants or social actors or for the kinds of language and literacy practices they socialized students into" (p. 3). Storey used CDA to link the relationship between discourse and power by analyzing language and images and correlating them with students' reflections on popular culture. Moreover, Duff & Zappa-Hollman (2011) focused on the politics of representational practices (visual, aural, and textual) to establish a basis for

understanding how contexts within popular culture are "discursively constructed, marginalized, commodified, or mocked, based on their social or linguistic characteristics" (p. 4). Duff & Zappa-Hollman's (2011) research revolves around the "social and linguistics lessons" (p. 4) learned by students through repeated exposure to particular messages projected through mass media and popular culture. These studies demonstrate how CDA can be used to decode the covert messages within popular culture and examine the aural and textual structure of critically-conscious hip-hop.

Josh Willard (2010), a Master of Arts student in Communication and New Media at McMaster University, examined the relationship between hip-hop artists' lyrics and their support for Barack Obama as President of the United States. Willard (2010) used quantitative content analysis (QCA) to examine "the frequency of words being associated with Obama [and] how they occurred in the song being measured" (para. 1). After reporting his findings in a table that summarized the results of the QCA, Willard (2010) engaged in critical discourse analysis to understand how these hip-hop songs affected "Obama's overall image as a [potential] President" (para. 6). For example, artists like Jay-Z said the following about Obama's presidential campaign: "Rosa Parks sat so Martin Luther King could walk. Martin Luther King walked so Obama could run. Obama's running so we all can fly" (2008). Even critically-conscious artists like Common rapped about "igniting the people like Obama" (2008, 3) in an effort to heighten morale during the 2008 global recession. These examples of CDA and critically-conscious hip-hop music are significant for my own research because they provide an understanding of how hip-hop lyrics operate as lingual memoirs that reflect upon the current state of our society. McGregor (2003) also suggests that "discourse analysis challenges us to move from seeing language as abstract to seeing

our words as having meaning in a particular historical, social, and political condition" (p. 7). Like Duff & Zappa-Hollman (2011), Willard's engagement with CDA enables us to contextualize selected hip-hop lyrics by associating their significance with Obama's political personality and campaign.

In my thesis, I use CDA to situate critically-conscious hip-hop within high school classrooms and also discuss its positive impact on student literacy. Although I will not be conducting quantitative content analysis, I select songs by critically-conscious artists and use CDA to examine the sociopolitical implications of each song. I am interested in selecting artists from different time periods in order to highlight the prevalence of social commentary in critically-conscious hip-hop. Tupac Shakur (1990-1995), Common (1995-present), and Kanye West (2002-present) all engage in sociopolitical critique in several of their songs. However, it is important to note that some of the artists I discuss in my thesis can be described as part-time critically-conscious rappers; in which social consciousness is not always in their best interests. This is in part justified by the precarious position that many rappers are situated in due to corporate demands. Record companies have highly-driven financial motives behind the marketing of their artists, and as a result, many rappers feel compelled to tailor a large portion of their music to the masses by rapping about topics that sell. Nevertheless, I have included some of these artists in my thesis because their devotion to social commentary must not be overshadowed by the capitalistic principles of record executives.

Critical Race Theory

I incorporate critical race theory (CRT) into this thesis to support my inquiry into the perpetual inequity witnessed within high school classrooms. CRT highlights the persistence of racism rather than focusing primarily upon instances of racism. CRT's exploration of racism runs parallels with my research analysis of critically-conscious hip-hop lyrics that highlight the same issue (Closson, 2010). In order to make the connections between CRT and critically-conscious hip-hop, it is important to understand the principles of CRT and its sociopolitical implications. In a general sense, a "CRT framework mixes strategy, research method, and definitional premises" (Closson, 2010, p. 262) to recognize race relations as a constantly-shifting phenomenon. CRT can also be measured as an interpretive framework, as well as a movement that unites critical theory directly with racism (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005). For educators, then, reflecting upon CRT as a framework for the critical inquiry of *isms* can support the cause for creating equitable learning spaces.

Ladson-Billings (1998) indicates that CRT materialized through a political backdrop during the Civil Rights Movement in the mid-1960s. This subsequently led to the critique of legislation through a CRT lens during the post-civil rights era and in turn triggered the establishment of CRT in the field of education during the early 1990s (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Several research journals that developed out of early CRT literature within the field of education attributed racism exclusively to the "prejudice of White teachers" (Rhyne, 1973, p. 263). However, scholars such as Hayes & Colin (1994) insisted that interlocking factors such as racism, sexism, and classism worked collectively to inhibit the academic success of African American students. Likewise, this outlook on racism assisted in transforming CRT into a framework that captured "the intersection of race, gender, and

class" (Closson, 2010, p. 263). Ladson-Billings (1995) has argued that the concept of race in education alone, along with gender and class theories, cannot explain the lack of academic achievement for African American students. Instead, she refutes the Black-White binary and identifies CRT as "oppositional scholarship" (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 122) by defining racism as an issue that *all* people of color experience. Scholars who situate their practice within a CRT framework seek to explain continuous injustices within classrooms by searching for methods to transform these inequities to contribute to the success of all people (Ladson-Billings, 1998). I will explore how CRT intersects with student disengagement and how CRT-based teaching strategies remain crucial for revising current educational curricula.

A CRT framework can be used as a tool for understanding how topics such as pedagogical practices operate as by-products of a broader issue. For my own research and development as a scholar in the field of education, my interest lies in CRT's counter-hegemonic doctrine; which focuses on challenging the information set out by a predetermined curriculum as the "normative standard" (Taylor, 1998, p. 122). CRT is a useful tool for my thesis because it provides me with an opportunity to critique the current educational structure by evaluating factors that seemingly legitimize hegemony within schools. I am certain that the concept of counter-hegemony through oppositional scholarship (Ladson-Billings, 1995) can lead to improvements in education. The goal, then, is to employ CRT as an agent for exposing the injustices of a normalized educational model.

Counter-Storytelling

The concept of counter-storytelling within a CRT framework ultimately challenges the use of "master narratives" (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 26) that uphold systems of oppression and social inequity. In this case, majoritarian stories overlook the experiences of

minority groups through distorted accounts, assumptions, and sheer ignorance (Ikemoto, 1997). To make sense of counter-storytelling, it is important to remember that the concept of White privilege is normalized in our society and consequently assigned default status (McIntosh, 1989). White privilege, according to McIntosh (1989), is the freedom to think, act, talk, and live in ways without fearing judgement or experiencing oppression (as an outcome of one's race). The persistence of White privilege in our society is in part internalized by groups of oppressed people who allow hegemony to side with normativity. As a result, integrating counter-storytelling into my research methodology provides me with an opportunity to explore systems of oppression and simultaneously challenge them.

Richard Delagado (1989) reminds us that "oppressed groups have known instinctively that stories are an important tool to their own survival and liberation" (p. 2436). It is important to think of counter-stories as more than just mere narratives and examine the sociopolitical ramifications of the experiences highlighted in these stories. For example, critically-conscious hip-hop listeners can be asked to consider the following questions: How do counter-stories inform the development of my own identity? What are the larger implications behind these counter-stories? How do these counter-stories challenge hegemony through critical thinking and analysis? Why are counter-stories important within the context of education and social action? Approaching counter-stories with an inquisitive mindset is especially important for exploring and examining social issues through a critical lens. To begin with, I examine different forms of counter-storytelling and then consider their significance within my thesis.

Counter-Storytelling and Hip-Hop

There are three genres of counter-stories that are commonly recognized by CRT scholars: "personal stories, other peoples' stories or narratives, and composite stories" (Merriweather & Guy, 2006, p. 245). Constructing composite counter-stories involves gathering data and sharing it with others through an (auto)biographical lens which highlights issues of social inequity (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). In my thesis, the stories of others are transmitted in two unique ways: through dialogue in classrooms and dialogue in music. A large portion of data that alludes to disengaged students stems from the stories and experiences shared by high school students across North America. These stories are collected through participant research that has been conducted by scholars in the field of hip-hop and education. I also acknowledge the lyrics within critically-conscious hip-hop music as first-hand commentary. As a result, the two separate methods for transmitting personal experiences ultimately allow me to examine the significance of these counter-stories within a sociopolitical framework. My hip-hop muse also operates as a personal counter-story that seeks to uncover creative thinking patterns that are often obscured within rigid curricula. For example, consider the short poem that I wrote in 2004 which comments on my position as a young, racialized, Indo-Canadian youth during the post-9/11 era:

> The world is crumbling, right before our eyes. We continue with our lives, and a missile hits the dirt. Nothing new---just the same nation being hurt. Starving children in search of moms and dads. We continue to ignore it, and pretend like we're sad. It affects us all, whether you're Caucasian or Asian. It's nothing more than an evil and chaotic invasion. Every minute passes and more bodies hit the ground. The fighter jets fly away, leaving behind an eerie sound.

My poem illustrates my difficulty with accepting the ongoing war in Afghanistan and Iraq. Many children were inadvertently killed as a result of the perpetrators' actions on 9/11. However, my racialized position in Canada somewhat limited my ability to express my discomfort with knowing how many innocent families would fall victim to the war over the next several years. Writing was an outlet that granted me with an opportunity to express my thoughts on topics that would otherwise be considered irrelevant or inappropriate in the classroom. I was, at that time, apprehensive about my brown skin; it spoke for me.

Incorporating critical race theory and counter-storytelling into my thesis encourages readers to think about and develop a critical language. Although my research does not exclusively focus on race and education, the model set out by CRT assists my thesis with constructing a foundation for confronting Eurocentric-based curricula that neglects the importance of culturally relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1992) classrooms. The goal for counter-storytellers in the field of education is not only to generate awareness about instances of inequity and oppression, but to also use these experiences to further implement equitable learning spaces within schools.

Counter-Storytelling and its Potential Limitations

My decision to incorporate my hip-hop muse into my research stemmed from my experiences as a young teenager searching for answers within the classroom. My hip-hop muse provides opportunities for others to learn from my experiences. In hindsight, I occasionally find myself learning new things about myself and my environment when I reflect back on my writing. As Creswell (2012) suggests, "people live storied lives" (p. 511). My story is told through my penmanship from several years ago; presenting a raw reflection on the state of education, self-worth, and society at that particular moment in

time. Narrative inquiry, however, must be understood as separate from counter-storytelling. Counter-storytelling focuses more upon the circulation of experiences as a form of sociopolitical critique (Creswell, 2012). Narrative inquiry often embodies interpretive research that utilizes narratives as examples for supporting arguments. For example, narrative researchers may retell stories that were originally told to them by participants. Nevertheless, the storytelling properties in each research method are important to note because there is always the potential for exaggerated or "half-told stories" (Creswell, 2012, p. 522) to emerge in research. Creswell (2012) also notes the following:

> Researchers need to be cautious about the stories. Is the story authentic? The participant may fake the data. Providing a story with a typical Hollywood ending, where the good guy or girl always wins. This distortion of the data may occur in any research study, and it presents an issue for narrative researchers in particular because they rely heavily on self-reported information from participants. (p. 522)

Perhaps the only research limitation that develops out of my hip-hop muse is the act of interpreting written material from several years ago. This process is often referred to as restorying (Creswell, 2012); in which stories are retold on the basis of one's recollection. My interpretation and understanding of my hip-hop muse may also be accelerated by my current knowledge of social issues that plague our educational system today.

Summary

The purpose of this chapter was to discuss the role of critical discourse analysis, critical race theory, and counter-storytelling in my thesis. This research approach allows me to investigate how discourse and social issues work within the context of education. CDA provides me with the opportunity to carefully examine the impact of critically-conscious

hip-hop on high school youth, while CRT and counter-storytelling support the notion that critically-conscious hip-hop has a profound impact on students' identities. I am also using CDA to investigate the counter-hegemonic approach taken by critically-conscious hip-hop artists. What stigmatized issues are brought up by these artists? How does this spark critical thinking and social consciousness amongst students? These types of questions are significant within the realm of socially and culturally relevant classrooms because they express the relationship between hip-hop discourse and the lives of students. Furthermore, counter-storytelling suggests that my own participation in counter-hegemonic discourse through writing was a by-product of listening to critically-conscious hip-hop music. As a result, the combination of CDA and counter-storytelling highlights the importance of critically-conscious hip-hop and simultaneously explores its genuine influence on its listeners. For educators, then, an acknowledgement of critically-conscious hip-hop as a legitimate form of social commentary and education must take place before considering its relevance (Ladson-Billings, 1992) within classrooms.

CHAPTER FOUR: ANALYSIS

Following this chapter introduction, I examine research that explores the connections between hip-hop and education in the section labelled Educational Researchers Document the Hip-Hop Effect. I then divide this chapter into eight sections which together outline the effect of hip-hop in schools, discuss counter-productive images in hip-hop music, and closely examine the significance of critically-conscious hip-hop in the lives of youth through critical discourse analysis and critical race theory.

I also provide a comprehensive outline of key themes in critically-conscious hip-hop through critical discourse analysis (CDA) in order to reflect on the genre's social, cultural, and political implications. By focusing on the lyrics of selected critically-conscious hip-hop songs, I credit the artists of these songs as storytellers. More importantly, I focus heavily on the recipients of these stories and consider critically-conscious hip-hop's influence from an educational standpoint. I consider *who* benefits from these stories, *how* these stories allude to social and cultural realities for many students, and *how* these stories play a positive role in the lives of students. In this case, the integration of my hip-hop muse from high school provides a first-hand account of hip-hop's influence on my identity and development of a critical language. Lastly, I use the themes I raised in my hip-hop muse to discuss student/teacher relations; in which many teachers perpetuate inequity by silencing hip-hop's presence in students' lives. Not only should socio-political issues underlined in critically-conscious hip-hop be addressed in the classroom, but contradicting (misogynistic and sexist) images within hip-hop culture must also be acknowledged and critiqued in order to spark critical awareness amongst students. I argue that it is important to examine hip-hop's effect on disengaged students by understanding how music can ultimately become a bridge to

support student interests with transformed educational practices such as culturally relevant pedagogy.

Educational Researchers Document The Hip-Hop Effect

Hallman (2009) outlines the representation of educational curricula as "in-school practices" that seldom engage with students' "out-of-school" interests (p. 36). In Hallman's (2009) study on the Eastview School for Pregnant and Parenting Teens in Lakeville, Michigan, she conceptualizes hip-hop music as out-of-school literacy that is often adopted by students and educators. The at-risk label assigned to these students is often challenged through their desire to rework the curriculum into an accommodating learning space. Bob Schaefer, an educator at Eastview School, challenged the issue of low literacy rates by integrating hip-hop music into his English class (Hallman, 2009). Schaefer's knowledge of the intricate relationship between teen motherhood and academic success is reconceptualised by incorporating critical parts of students' lives into classroom discussion. Organizations like the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) discuss the role of "various literacies both inside and outside of school [...] that teachers often devalue and ignore; assuming these literacies are morally suspect" (2007, p. 3). In essence, advocates for culturally relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1992) classrooms are proposing that out-of-school literacies like hip-hop become customary educational practices. In addition to this, scholars who stress the importance of multiliteracies are ultimately drawing upon "youth's authentic voice in efforts to promote [equitable] classroom learning" (Hallman, 2009, p. 39). To better understand the influence of hip-hop on students at Eastview School, consider the student journals that developed out of Hallman's research.

Taneka, a student at Eastview School, comments on hip-hop as a tool for learning and inquiring:

> Hip hop to me is music that entertains the mind. Hip hop can be about money and violence, but the music I like is about real things. Like when the two towers came down and artists came together and wrote a song about the tragedy. The song gave tribute to all those whose lives were lost. Hip hop makes me think and question things going on around me. (Hallman, 2009, pp. 42-43)

The significance of Taneka's entry is her ability to differentiate between mainstream hip-hop and critically-conscious hip-hop. Hip-hop can be violent and misogynistic; yet she understands that not all hip-hop embodies these traits. Instead, critically-conscious hip-hop music evaluates the reality of her social environment. In my view, her inspiration discovered through critically-conscious hip-hop is a display of its three promising insights: the articulation of social commentary; the establishment of a personal connection to the text and talk used in the classroom; and a critical inquiry into real world events. Consider the impact of Tupac Shakur on another student, LaTasha, as conveyed through her short letter to her idol:

> Dear Tupac,
>
> You speak to me.
>
> Your music makes me remember the good times when life wasn't hard and there weren't responsibilities. But even now you tell me that I can do it and be a good mom. I miss you. (Hallman, 2009, p. 36)

LaTasha, a teen parent, not only engages with elements of nostalgia triggered by Tupac's music, but she also positions Tupac's music as a form of reassurance for her uncertainty of

being able to parent effectively. These examples of hip-hop as empowerment and inspiration are important to consider within a classroom context for two reasons: they reject preconceived notions about all forms of hip-hop music being destructive, and they also assist with making a case for critically-conscious hip-hop music as a legitimate tool for engaging students in literacy practices.

Like Taneka's and LaTasha's entries, additional methods for engaging students with hip-hop music as well as the school requirements for literacy development are of equal importance. Another example of using hip-hop for literacy development is discussed by Weinstein (2006). He points out hip-hop's use of cultural spaces to mediate reality versus play and indicates that there are literally "grounds set aside for play […] where the level of play between two individuals (i.e., battle-rapping/writing) is directly related to the level of trust in their relationship" (p. 278). Battle-rapping can be best described as an activity where two participants rap to defeat one another through wordplay, use of metaphors, and imaginative discourse. On the other hand, battle-writing requires participants to write verses down on paper and then share them with each other. Competing with one another through written or rapped verses that are sometimes regarded as attempts to humiliate the other person are in fact cultural scripts that provide an opportunity for the participants to demonstrate their knowledge and literary techniques.

According to Weinstein (2006), both a figurative arena is constructed through "rapping as play" (p. 279) and an opportunity for individuals to express themselves in a way that would normally be considered inappropriate or unconventional. Youth who engage in these types of activities are the recipients of a culture that is often distorted by misconceptions and assumptions. The example of youth participating in hip-hop related

activities emphasizes the power and presence of hip-hop within schools. Undeniably, common themes found in mainstream hip-hop music (i.e., sex, drugs, and violence) also resonate within schools. However, the benefits of integrating critically-conscious hip-hop into the curriculum as a tool for empowerment, engagement, and education cannot be ignored. In fact, to overlook the advantages of constructing a hip-hop infused curriculum is no different than candidly promoting student disengagement. Such student disengagement is experienced as a result of the current Eurocentric curriculum. For some students, such as Mexican American youth in low-income areas in Chicago, hip-hop's marginality within the school curriculum is indicative of their own position in society.

In Pulido's (2009) study of hip-hop pedagogy, Raul, a recent graduate from an inner-city Chicago high school, states that hip-hop music "puts things into perspective [and is] fit for us minorities" (p. 73). Raul's statement underlines the notion of second-class citizenship assigned to both his social position and the position of hip-hop as an interpretive framework within schools (Pulido, 2009). In the opening pages of my thesis, I briefly discussed my research on critically-conscious hip-hop music as an art form that was open to everyone. In this case, a central theme developed out of Pulido's (2009) research which signified the importance of a collective identity amongst disengaged students. For example, Gabriela, also a graduate from an inner-city Chicago high school, states the following:

Like we grew up kinda side by side with African Americans like maybe not in the exact same neighbourhood but definitely side by side, especially here in Chicago. It's like I could always identify with what [hip hop artists] were talking about…It's like even though someone's talking about New York at the same time they're also talking about Chicago. So I think you know they can be Latino and not be African

American. Like so even though I didn't know about the Black power struggle or any

of that I could still identify with the power struggle. (Pulido, 2009, p. 74)

For Gabriela, hip-hop music transcends (racially defined) counter-hegemonic discourse and

instead operates as a vehicle for sharing experiences and histories between marginalized

individuals and communities.

The intersection of experiences and power struggles between two separate ethnic

groups also highlights the notion of hegemony and oppression as ongoing and

problematical. How does hip-hop truly impact students in an academic sense? How do

sociopolitical issues addressed in critically-conscious hip-hop music assist with developing

a critical language for its listeners? Perhaps Gabriela's outlook on hip-hop as a curriculum

can promote the art form as a source for sharing knowledge and experiences:

Listening to hip hop, I think for me, was different because there were so many

different messages. Like not only race, you know, but self-empowerment. There

were, like, messages about why learning is important, going to school is important,

why being, you know, developing yourself as a person is what's important…From

there is where I started reading about different artists', like, biographies and the

issues that they were mentioning and kinda started looking at those issues. Like what

is he talking about? What's going on? Why is he mentioning this? And so you start

to ask questions…Like something about Reaganomics and, you know, I always was

like, "What are they talking about?" And then it's like as I started reading more

articles, it was like learning a lot of like what happened during the Reagan era,

especially the 80s and I was like, "Oh, ok. So this is what happened." And you kinda

see the connection between the policies that were passed and how they affected a

certain... For me it was like that's what connected it. (Pulido, 2009, p. 75)

Gabriela's statement evidently bridges political events and policies with social realities

today. However, her reference to absorbing the messages within the music and in turn

questioning its implications highlights the development of critical thinking and inquiry

through a critically-conscious hip-hop lens. For Gabriela, the foundation of critically-

conscious hip-hop is the music itself; while the messages function as funds of knowledge

(Moll, Veléz-Ibañéz, & Greenberg, 1989) waiting to be explored. According to Gee (1996),

it is important to acknowledge funds such as:

> homes, peer groups, and other systems and networks of relationships that shape the
>
> oral and written texts young people make meaning of and produce as they move
>
> from classroom to classroom and from home to peer group, to school, or to
>
> community. It is equally important to examine the ways that these funds, or
>
> networks and relationships, shape ways of knowing, reading, writing, and talking.
>
> (p. 38)

Engaging with critically-conscious hip-hop discourse is unique because it allows youth to

explore sociopolitical discourse while participating in self-exploration by finding meaning

in their day-to-day existence.

The outlook on hip-hop as a legitimate educational curriculum coincides with Aoki's

(1993) analysis of a lived curriculum. In this case, "a lived curriculum, of course, is not the

curriculum as laid out in a plan, but a plan more or less lived out" (Aoki, 1993, p. 257).

Aoki (1993) outlines the central tenets of a planned curriculum versus a lived curriculum:

On one hand is the prosaic discourse of the external curriculum planners, whose

techni- scientific language of planning is the striated language of ends-means.

Further, this prosaic language is abstract, written for faceless people in a

homogeneous realm. On the other hand is the language of the lived curriculum, the

more poetic, phenomenological and hermeneutic discourse in which life is embodied

in the very stories and languages people speak and live. These two discourses are

different in kind; they resist integration. (p.261)

A lived curriculum, then, does not primarily embody experiences outside of classrooms, but

also the way those experiences are humanized within classrooms. This social

reconstructionist approach to educating students opposes the traditional implementation of

curricula and instead focuses on the exploration of education through individual experiences

both inside and outside of schools. Aoki (1993) characterizes this pedagogical approach as a

"curricular landscape of multiplicity" (p. 259) that defines learning through experience as an

organic transformation amongst students in classrooms. As a result, student identities and

individual knowledge shape the curricular structure of classrooms. Moreover, the classroom

serves as a figurative arena for mediating educational discourse amongst educators and

students. Like Gabriela's outlook on hip-hop as a source for education, the lived curriculum

bridges independent student identities and interests with the conception of learning through

experience within an educational space.

The Dark Side of Hip-Hop

Dr. Cynthia Frisby (2010), an associate professor at the University of Missouri

School of Journalism, wrote an article on derogatory lyrics in popular songs to emphasize

the existence of misogyny in hip-hop. According to Adams & Fuller (2006), misogyny is

"the hatred or disdain of women [that] reduces women to objects for men's ownership, use, or abuse" (p. 939). Although hip-hop is by no means the original perpetrator of misogynistic ideology, many scholars argue that hip-hop music actively represents itself in an anti-female manner. Frisby's (2010) primary focus was on lyrical content within hip-hop music that included slang words such as "bitchez [and] ho" (p. 12) to describe women. At the end of her article, Frisby (2010) concluded that "data obtained in the study found that rap lyrics objectify, devalue, or subjugate women through insulting and subordinating words" (p. 17). Of course, Frisby's results wholeheartedly represent the realities of the majority of mainstream hip-hop music. However, Frisby only provides a comparative analysis of mainstream hip-hop, country music, pop, R&B, alternative rock, Latin, jazz, and rock. The absence of critically-conscious hip-hop music within the study leads to a general misconception of hip-hop culture. While Frisby indicates that her study focuses on popular hip-hop music, the absence of an alternative to mainstream hip-hop music only propagates assumptions about the entire culture. Nevertheless, Frisby's research results echo the regrettable nature of an abundance of mainstream hip-hop music that has shown absolutely no progress over the years in addressing issues of misogyny.

Although misogyny and hyper-masculinity are apparent in contemporary mainstream hip-hop music, the origins of misogyny in hip-hop ironically developed out of songs during the civil rights movement (Gourdine & Lemmons, 2011). According to Rozie-Battle (2003), the emergence of misogyny in hip-hop music commented on more than just gender relations; it focused on an era in Black communities where drugs, violence, and social inequity led to the internalized oppression of Blacks. When listeners gave local artists attention for misogynistic music, artists simply looked at rap as a tool for financial gain and

also as a way out of their harsh environments. More importantly, though, Rozie-Battle (2003) indicates that misogyny in hip-hop music also traces back to the history of Black-White relations in North America during the time period of slavery. From a historical standpoint, it can be argued that African American women's beauty and intellect has been overlooked for their sexualized bodies (Rozie-Battle, 2003). Consider, for example, how lighter-skinned Black women are often regarded as more beautiful or sexier than their darker-hued counterparts. We live in a world where lighter-skinned Black women like Beyoncé Knowles, Tyra Banks, and Halle Berry single-handedly define the superficial thought of Black beauty. In this case, the obsession with light-skinned Black women and beauty is endorsed by the media and ultimately absorbed and reiterated by our society.

In relation to mainstream hip-hop music and misogyny, the example above provides a framework for understanding how mainstream hip-hop music is often unfairly and exclusively pinpointed as the sole perpetrator of gender inequity. Misogyny must be described as a component of "global consciousness [rather than] Black consciousness" (Adams & Fuller, 2006, pp. 942-943). For example, bell hooks (1994) states that "the sexist, misogynistic, patriarchal ways of thinking and behaving that are glorified in [popular] rap are a reflection of the prevailing values in our society" (p. 2). It is important to remember that I am not justifying offensive lyrics in popular hip-hop songs. In fact, I am denouncing misogyny in hip-hop music and also urging others to think critically about hip-hop as a phenomenon that is not free of external influences that shape the entire culture. With hundreds of debilitating messages that reinforce sexism, racism, and stereotypes through multiple media outlets, popular hip-hop artists are equally open to exposure as the students we educate. For critically-conscious hip-hop artists, the goal is to absorb these messages for

the purpose of critiquing them and refusing to live by them. The musical component comes into play when critically-conscious artists share their insight on issues that echo oppression, inequity, and an ongoing feeling of hopelessness for our society. To better understand how popular hip-hop music is often shaped by external influences, it is necessary to consider the notion of crime and violence as an imaginative construct for coolness and cultural capital.

In a News One article published online in March 2009, Casey Gane-McCalla discussed the issue of rappers naming themselves after infamous drug dealers and criminals. For example, artists like Rick Ross, Noreaga, and Capone have all acquired their hip-hop monikers after notorious drug bosses. Likewise, consider the rapper, Scarface, who named himself after a blockbuster crime film released in the early 1980s. Many rappers feel as though they are required to assert their masculinity through violence and illicit activities that seemingly legitimatize their authenticity. Byron Hurt, a filmmaker and avid hip-hop fan, refers to this reinforcement of masculinity through hip-hop lyrics as "psychic armour"; in which the lyrical content that deals with issues of drugs, violence, and gang activity is not an accurate representation of rappers' actual lifestyles (2006). Casey Gane-McCalla suggests that rappers' idolization of a crime culture is extremely dangerous for today's youth (2009). While I agree with his claims on the adoration of crime being hazardous for youth, the homogenization of hip-hop music as a one-dimensional art form represses the use of critically-conscious hip-hop in the field of education. For example, the author of the article states that "the rest of society seems to condemn crime, [and] hip-hop glorifies it. Terms like thugs, gangsters and goons, which have negative connotations in society are positive terms in the hip-hop world" (Casey Gane-McCalla, 2009). I would argue that many of the negative representations in mainstream hip-hop music are in fact by-products of

celebrated crime films that embody visual representations of violence, drugs, and hyper-masculinity. How can hip-hop music alone be commented on without considering the source of its offensive material?

Casey Gane-McCalla further states that "it's cool to watch a gangster movie or a documentary on crime" (2009). The lack of consideration for the impact of these films on youth is quite problematic. Why are stars like Brad Pitt or George Clooney praised for playing the roles of criminals who tactfully rob casinos in Las Vegas? What makes it acceptable for movies like *The Matrix* to showcase futuristic gun portals and scenes that contain more violence than any mainstream hip-hop video I have ever watched? Or consider the films that John Wayne starred in that violently depicted race relations between Whites and Native Americans. Perhaps the more important question to ask is whether the negative assumptions about *all* hip-hop is indicative of a larger social issue that inaudibly associates blackness with violence. I have written exhaustively about critically-conscious hip-hop music and its properties that would inevitably favour an equitable curriculum. I will begin the next section with two imperative questions in mind: What does critically-conscious hip-hop music look like on paper? What are the implications of the major themes that resonate within the music?

Step Into My World: Critically-Conscious Hip-Hop

In order to provide an accurate representation of critically-conscious hip-hop music, I constructed a comprehensive list of artists and songs that best represented hip-hop as a form of educational learning. As a result, I chose the following five rappers for my thesis: Tupac Shakur, Common, Mos Def, Q-Tip, and Kanye West. To situate each song within the context of a thesis that utilizes critical discourse analysis, tables 2 through 6 highlight major

themes in each artist's songs. The purpose of these tables is not only to draw parallels between each artist and their music, but to also introduce subject matter that is often absent in mainstream hip-hop music.

It is important to note that I discuss research limitations within my thesis by critiquing the contradicting images exhibited by some of the artists I have selected for my thesis. I also comment on critically-conscious hip-hop and the role of corporate influence that can often distort meaningful messages within the music. Tables 2 through 6 offer a succinct frame of reference for understanding the social and cultural significance of critically-conscious hip-hop. Looking at the themes in each of the songs listed within the tables below, it is apparent that hip-hop can be recognized as a useful source for educational practices. To better understand the implications of the songs in this thesis, I created five separate categories that assist with examining the significance of critically-conscious hip-hop music as a foundation for critique and empowerment. The categories include: historical inquiry, social commentary through counter-narratives, empowerment, masculinity, and critical race theory. In each category, my goal is to reflect upon critically-conscious hip-hop as a musical phenomenon that surpasses the fundamental limits of music as merely a combination of words and sounds.

Table 2

Sample Songs by Tupac Shakur for Use in Educational Settings and Their Major Themes

Tupac Shakur	Major Themes
"Words of Wisdom" (1991) Album: *2Pacalypse Now*	-considering the alternative curriculum (education through history and experience) -empowering our youth -education as a tool for battling oppression -social commentary on the history of Black displacement during the corporate revitalization of communities in North America -society's fear of counter-hegemonic discourse
"Changes" (1992) Album: *Greatest Hits*	-blackness as a disadvantage -social commentary on relationship between Blacks and the police -Black unity -crack epidemic during the 1970s -internalized oppression and hegemonic whiteness -racial profiling
"Holla If Ya Hear Me" (1993) Album: *Strictly for my N.I.G.G.A.Z*	-social commentary on Rodney King and Los Angeles riots -opposing conventional knowledge -mainstream hip-hop and its lack of regard for sociopolitical issues -current and historical forms of oppression against Blacks -financial success through rapping
"Keep Ya Head Up" (1993) Album: *Strictly for my N.I.G.G.A.Z*	-social commentary on welfare and socioeconomic disparities -internalized oppression through abusive relationships -single parenthood -liberal feminist ideology -deconstructing hegemonic masculinity -music as a form of social empowerment
"Young Niggaz" (1995) Album: *Me Against the World*	-racial intolerance and social inequity -the impact of social realities on youth through personal accounts -feelings of hopelessness -perpetuation of internalized oppression -social commentary on drop out rates and crime rates within Black communities

Table 3

Sample Songs by Q-Tip for Use in Educational Settings and Their Major Themes

Q-Tip	Major Themes
"Youthful Expression" (1990) Album: *People's Instinctive Travels and the Paths of Rhythm*	-creativity and personal development -emphasizing the focus on youth -social commentary on misleading politics -positive music as a form of legitimate discourse/dialogue -sharing knowledge from the perspective of a teenager
"Sucka Nigga" (1993) Album: *Midnight Marauders*	-social commentary on drug (ab)use -historical reference on slavery and the origins of the word "nigga" -contextualizing language -devaluing the importance of Black history through mainstream music
"We Can Get Down" (1993) ***contains some lyrics by Phife Dawg*** Album: *Midnight Marauders*	-strictly representing hip-hop -reluctance to enter into mainstream hip-hop -critically-conscious hip-hop music as commentary on social realities -historical reference to Nelson Mandela's release from prison -silencing the critics of hip-hop music through critical consciousness -Black unity and anti-gun ideology
"Dance On Glass" (2008) Album: *The Renaissance*	-corporate influence on hip-hop music -bringing back critically-conscious hip-hop to the forefront -critiquing mainstream hip-hop music (i.e., hyper-consumerism and materialism) -critically-conscious hip-hop music as therapeutic and beneficial for all
"Shaka" (2008) Album: *The Renaissance*	-celebrating your loved ones -current mainstream hip-hop music as a false representation of the entire hip-hop culture -critically-conscious hip-hop music as an agent for self-motivation -mainstream hip-hop music's sole commitment to monetary gain

Table 4

Sample Songs by Mos Def for Use in Educational Settings and Their Major Themes

Mos Def	Major Themes
"Umi Says" (1999) Album: *Black on Both Sides*	-self-consciousness and the pressure of becoming a "perfect man" -making use of scarce resources to make a living -the ongoing struggle for Blacks and achieving true freedom -social commentary on communities inundated in socioeconomic crisis -feelings of hopelessness -Black unity, peace, love, and understanding
"Champion Requiem" (2004) Album: *The New Danger*	-internalized oppression -ongoing fear of White hegemony -using knowledge and experience for personal growth -commentary on crime rates and prisoners serving life sentences (evoking hope) -contemporary critically-conscious hip-hop music paying homage to past contributors
"Modern Marvel" (2004) Album: *The New Danger*	-deconstructing traditional forms of masculinity -married women as lone parents -internalized oppression through the lack of support for successful members in struggling communities -lack of brotherhood amongst all men -exploiting impoverished neighbourhoods to achieve mainstream success
"Beef" (2008) Not on Album	-the lasting effects of the crack epidemic during the 1970s -social commentary on the AIDS epidemic -the "gangster" persona in hip-hop music operating as a defence mechanism -social commentary on oil prices, America's involvement in wars, and job shortages
"History" (2009) ***contains some lyrics by Talib Kweli*** Album: *The Ecstatic*	-paying homage to the Brooklyn streets -identities influenced and shaped by past and present experiences -the hypocrisy associated with Black unity and the glorification of firearms -the history of oppressed people

Table 5

Sample Songs by Kanye West for Use in Educational Settings and Their Major Themes

Kanye West	Major Themes
"Family Business" (2004) Album: *The College Dropout*	-social commentary on the increased number of Blacks in North American prisons -anti-materialism and anti hyper-consumerism -deconstructing traditional conceptions of masculinity -countering popular assumptions and representations of hip-hop culture through critical-consciousness
"Spaceship" (2004) ***contains some lyrics by GLC*** Album: *The College Dropout*	-everyday struggles through a narrative lens -workplace harassment -attitudes of low-income groups -reminiscing about the past (including deceased family members) -social commentary on high drop out rates amongst Black communities -suicidal ideation
"Heard 'Em Say" (2005) Album: *Late Registration*	-social commentary on the AIDS epidemic -job shortages and minimum wage -social commentary on rate of Blacks in American prisons -social critique on materialism and dreams driven by financial gain
"Promised Land" (2008) ***contains some lyrics by Malik Yusef*** Not on Album	-the assumption that minorities are required to speak on behalf of all minority groups -social commentary on the "hidden curriculum" and failure to address inequity with regards to First Nations groups -social commentary on the correlation between mass debt and materialism
"Gorgeous" (2010) ***contains some lyrics by Raekwon*** Album: *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy*	-the notion of blackness as a brand -current state of the job market -social commentary on the AIDS epidemic -critically-conscious hip-hop as the form of music that youth are missing today -representations of Blacks in the media -social commentary on the correlation between mass debt and materialism -hope and empowerment through learning from critically-conscious hip-hop artists

Table 6

Sample Songs by Common for Use in Educational Settings and Their Major Themes

Common	Major Themes
"Be (Intro)" (2005) Album: *Be*	-social commentary on drug (ab)use -critique of politics and war -social commentary on guns -adoration for all women who continue to battle oppression
"Black Maybe" (2007) Album: *Finding Forever*	-the uncertainty associated with being Black -commentary on the crack epidemic -instability within low-income communities -internalized oppression through the lack of support for successful members within low-income communities -racism as a mental construct
"The People" (2007) Album: *Finding Forever*	-critically-conscious hip-hop music as a remedy for the working class -commentary on White privilege -challenging the sexualisation of all women -the influence of music on peoples' lives -political reference to Barack Obama
"A Letter to the Law" (2010) Not on Album	-questionable killings/disappearances of Blacks in America that often go unnoticed -the role of the media in building superstar artists and subsequently tearing them down (reference to Michael Jackson) -Tupac Shakur as the Martin Luther King Jr. of critically-conscious hip-hop -the hypocrisy associated with preaching for global peace while equipping firearms
"Blue Sky" (2011) Album: *The Dreamer/The Believer*	-commentary on the importance of achieving financial success through socially and culturally responsible hip-hop music -empowerment and hope by using dreams to fuel reality -critically-conscious hip-hop music as a tool for healing listeners that are repeatedly exposed to harmful messages in mainstream hip-hop music

Critically-Conscious Hip-Hop and Historical Inquiries

During the early stages of critically-conscious hip-hop music, the majority of lyrical content was a result of harsh social realities. Songs focused heavily upon issues like the crack epidemic during the 1970s-1980s and inexplicable issues like the Rodney King story in the early 1990s. For artists like Tupac Shakur, stating that "the punk police can't fade me, and maybe, we can have peace someday G" (1993, 1) was both a reference to his position as a Black male in the U.S at the time and the fading Los Angeles riots that took place the previous year. The bulk of historical inquiries in each of the 25 songs in this chapter outline the impact of the crack epidemic that devastated thousands of communities across the United States. Originally stemming from the increase in cocaine trafficking through countries like Columbia and the Dominican Republic, the presence of "crack", a less-expensive and freebase form of cocaine, rapidly infiltrated major cities and impoverished areas (USDEA, 1985-1990). According to the United States Drug Enforcement Administration (1985-1990) history book, a study conducted by the Bureau of Justice Statistics found that "in New York City, crack use was tied to 32% of all homicides and 60% of drug-related homicides" (1988). Moreover, with the revitalization of inner-cities triggered by unaffordable housing and corporate invasion, poverty rates increased and many low-income households (especially those consisting of single parents) desperately searched for an outlet. With the availability of crack-cocaine, many men and women developed addictions that led to "a generation of addicted children born to–and frequently abandoned by–crack-using mothers" (United States Drug Enforcement Agency, 1985-1990). When Tupac raps: "give the crack to the kids, who the hell cares? One less hungry mouth on the welfare [...] first ship 'em dope & let 'em deal the brothers, give 'em guns, step back, and

watch 'em kill each other" (1992, 5), he addresses issues of poverty, the position of African Americans at the end of the twentieth century, and the increase in crack-addicted single parents. One of the most fascinating aspects of analyzing the lyrics in this form of hip-hop music is its ability to tell a story through historical inquiry and simultaneously spark thinking in the form of critique and conspiracies. Surely the crack epidemic took place in numerous cities across the United States, yet Tupac questions the legitimacy of relief efforts to prevent crack addiction in Black communities. For Tupac, the reality/conspiracy binary serves as an example of social commentary that speaks to the issue of Black subordination in White America.

For artists like Mos Def and Common, although the crack epidemic serves as a reminder of the lingering effects of drug abuse, much of the historical inquiry in their music comments on discourse that is often neglected within classrooms. Mos Def, a rapper from New York City, reminds listeners that authentic "beef" (or feuds) should be attributed to issues that affect communities every day; not irrational quarrels between rap artists asserting their masculinity through portrayals of violence and aggression. For example, he states: "beef is when the crack kids can't find moms, 'cause they in a pine box or locked behind bars" (2008). For Common, a rapper from Chicago, Mos Def's reference to "crack kids" (2008) could not reverberate any clearer as he openly states in his song, "Black Maybe", that he was "delivered into this world as a crack baby, [making it hard for him] to pay attention [and] acting crazy" (2007, 8). This honest admission, however, only serves as an example of an African American who undoubtedly endured an epidemic that seemingly consumed his entire upbringing.

Historical references can also serve as a model for demonstrating the knowledge of critically-conscious hip-hop artists. From references to Nelson Mandela to a critical analysis on the origins of the word "nigga", artists like Q-Tip converse about important facets of history that ultimately serve as an indeterminate curriculum. For example, Q-Tip examines the use of the word "nigga" from both a social and historical perspective:

> See, nigga first was used back in the deep south, fallin' out between the dome of the white man's mouth. It means that we will never grow; you know the word 'dummy', other niggas in the community think it's crummy. But I don't, neither does the youth 'cause we em-brace adversity, it goes right with the race. (1993, 5)

In this case, instead of assigning the word "nigga" with negative connotations amongst African Americans, Q-Tip is suggesting that the word should be embraced and acknowledged as a reminder of the hardships that countless Blacks experienced. A historical investigation on the term essentially provides a reasonable account on the use of the word today. Furthermore, Tupac's adaptation of the word "N.I.G.G.A" (Never Ignorant Getting Goals Accomplished) operates as an acronym that surely induces social empowerment and resilience. Inevitably, historical inquiry in critically-conscious hip-hop music often serves as discourse with multiple aims to educate listeners on past issues that resonate in communities today. The goal for educators, then, is to embrace critically-conscious hip-hop music as a form of critical inquiry *before* looking at it exclusively as music.

Critically-Conscious Hip-Hop and Social Commentary Through Counter-Narratives

Social commentary through counter-narratives in critically-conscious hip-hop provides listeners with an opportunity to contextualize discourse within music. With regards to my thesis, themes such as: materialism, hyper-consumerism, global consciousness, and

countering popular assumptions about hip-hop culture arise out of the songs selected for this

chapter. For example, Kanye West, a rapper from Chicago and also one of the most

renowned artists in the field of hip-hop today, states: "all of them fallin' for the love of

ballin', got caught with 30 Rock(s), the cop looked like Alec Baldwin" (2010, 2). Kanye not

only highlights the notion of materialism by any means necessary, but he also sketches a

blueprint of social realities for many youth today. In this case, though the 30 Rock(s) and

Alec Baldwin remark refers to a popular television series, Kanye is implying that "30 rocks"

is in fact the act of trafficking cocaine; which is often endorsed by the need to "ball" or live

lavishly. On the other hand, Kanye's reference to Alec Baldwin is an inventive way of

homogenizing all police officers as typical White men. For Kanye, then, the formula that

begins with emulating a lifestyle adorned with expensive cars and jewellery, ultimately

leads to involvement in illegal activities that end with severe consequences. This pattern is

all too familiar for artists like Kanye who made the conscious decision of dropping out of

college to pursue a career in music. Perhaps Kanye's assessment of issues involving drug

dealing amongst youth is an attempt to label every form of illicit behaviour as

counterproductive and self-harming. More importantly, "all of them fallin'" (2010)

undoubtedly triggers feelings of dismay that somewhat highlight the issue of youth,

materialism, and unlawful behaviour as irrepressible.

The topic of materialism or hyper-consumerism that is often propagated through

mainstream hip-hop music and various media outlets is prevalent in countless critically-

conscious hip-hop songs. Common's lyrics that state: "Every day we hustling, tryin' to get

them custom rims, laws we ain't trusting them, thick broads we lusting them" (2007, 3)

essentially highlight the vicious cycle of the effects of glorified images that consume

listeners every day. If images of custom rims do not dominate songs within mainstream hip-hop, then the lust for "thick broads" and the simultaneous hyper-sexualisation of women's bodies surely amasses unethical attention. Furthermore, Common's social critique of White privilege is also important to consider within the context of contemporary North American society: "while White folks focus on dogs and yoga, my people on the low end trying to ball and get over" (2007, 3). The reference to "getting over" is interpretively suggesting that there is a socioeconomic divide that governs a model devoted to determining individuals' social class. Common's insight into upper-class White status in the U.S through "dogs and yoga" outlines privileges that entail recreation and leisure. As a result, Common's depiction of social classes is also reminiscent of the glass ceiling that remains intact within the workforce that limits opportunities for working women.

One of the most important facets of critically-conscious hip-hop music is the integration of social commentary through counter-storytelling. Many critically-conscious hip-hop songs naturally situate themselves as counter-narratives by engaging with counter-hegemonic discourse. However, songs like "Black Maybe" by Common highlight deep-rooted issues like internalized oppression in low-income Black communities; resulting in impediments for low-income youth searching for positive ways to escape from their harsh social environments. In "Black Maybe", Common passionately raps about the intricacies associated with low-income Black youth who are seeking personal and academic success by leaving the neighbourhoods they grew up in:

> He was living the life they couldn't fathom. Colleges getting at him, with all types of scholarships. Even if he went, they knew he'd leave college quick...for the pros, the one from the hood that was chose. The black rose that grew in the jungle, a humble

stud […] Dudes in his circle he known for years, shared beers and cheers but chose

different careers. When paper and fame came, they didn't know how to react. Them

same studs shot him in the back, now that's black…maybe. (2007, 8)

To begin with, the title "Black Maybe" is a unique way of looking at blackness in

contemporary North American society through a lens of ambiguity. For Common, issues of

intolerance and (internalized) oppression that correspond with blackness ultimately lead to

the perpetuation of social injustice and inequity within Black communities. Common's

verse operates as a counter-narrative by discussing the issue of internalized oppression

amongst Black youth; which, undeniably, is commonly overlooked within classrooms.

Instead of focusing exclusively on oppression as a source for hegemonic whiteness or

patriarchy, Common suggests that we (both educators and listeners) must consider how self-

colonization takes place in our communities every day. Whether the reference to "shot him

in the back" (2007, 8) is implying physical violence or abandonment through the lack of

support for each other, the reality of Common's counter-narrative mirrors analogous issues

endured by youth today.

One of the key examples of counter-narratives that demonstrate counter-hegemonic

discourse is Kanye West's opposition to unfair assumptions about hip-hop music. In his

song, "Family Business", Kanye earnestly raps about the transcendence of critical-

consciousness into mainstream hip-hop music. He raps: "I woke up early this mornin' with

a new state of mind, a creative way to rhyme without using knives and guns. Keep your

nose out the sky, keep your heart to God, and keep your face to the rising sun" (2004, 20).

While I argue that the role of critically-conscious hip-hop is to instruct students and

educators on critical thinking and critical awareness, Kanye's verse is important to consider

within the context of debunking myths about hip-hop music. It is, however, also crucial to point out that songs like "Family Business" will never receive radio play because of their coalescence with critical-consciousness. As a result, not only does this formula highlight the role of record companies as promoters of sexually-driven or hyper-masculine music, but it also falsely characterizes rappers like Kanye West as customary rap artists solely seeking financial gain through inconsequential music.

Every song listed within my thesis is a counter-narrative; in which "oppositional scholarship" (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 122) can be ascribed to the presence of counter-hegemonic discourse that is often disregarded or overlooked in schools and in society. Consequently, the oppositional stance taken by critically-conscious hip-hop is also a reflection of the legitimacy of hip-hop culture as an educational tool for youth. In this case, it seeks knowledge through experience and counter-narratives that necessitate social commentary through historical inquiry. Aside from looking at hip-hop as just a vehicle for developing critical literacies within schools, it is also important to examine the relationship between critically-conscious hip-hop music and youth empowerment.

Critically-Conscious Hip-Hop and Youth Empowerment

Hallman's (2009) study on hip-hop's influence on youth captured one of the most profound statements on hip-hop as a literary voice for disengaged students. LaTasha, a single-parent and teen mother, stated the following in a short poem: "Dear Tupac, you speak to me" (Hallman, 2009, p. 36). As a hip-hop advocate and critically-conscious hip-hop enthusiast, LaTasha's reference to Tupac enticed me into exploring countless songs by Tupac that may have potentially impacted LaTasha from a parenting standpoint. After a brief inquest into Tupac's critically-conscious music, I found LaTasha's situation and

ongoing resilience as a single-parent mirroring Tupac's song, "Keep Ya Head Up". In the song, Tupac discusses motherhood from the perspective of a single-mother on welfare escaping an abusive relationship:

> I give a holler to my sisters on welfare, Tupac cares, and don't nobody else care [...] But please don't cry, dry your eyes and never let up. Forgive, but don't forget, girl keep ya head up. And when he tells you you ain't nothin', don't believe him. And if he can't learn to love you, you should leave him [...] You know it makes me unhappy, when brothers make babies, and leave a young mother to be a pappy.
>
> (1993, 11)

Evidently, the social commentary through (counter) narratives in Tupac's music provides its listeners with empowerment in two ways: it affirms the existence of social issues by acknowledging them, and it also presents directives for young women seeking support for their position within society.

Empowerment within critically-conscious hip-hop music is not always centralized as the key theme of a particular song. Q-Tip, for example, communicates feelings of empowerment by casually offering one-liners like "Even if you have one person with you when it's hard, it makes it easy, so celebrate them and let them know just who they are [and] don't lose sight ya'll without giving a fight" (2008, 12). Though entirely interpretive, the intriguing aspect of critically-conscious hip-hop is its ability to thwart negativity through the absence of content that entails homophobia and misogyny. Furthermore, with lyrics that present different avenues for understanding the implications of specific social issues, critically-conscious hip-hop narratives offer a dialogue that is often suppressed by Eurocentric discourse within schools. In this case, whether Q-Tip's "fight" refers to the

hardships of single-parenthood or the complexity involved with balancing school and work, these brief allusions to self-empowerment produce a musical atmosphere designed for the people.

Critically-Conscious Hip-Hop and Deconstructing Masculinity

One of the underlying themes in mainstream hip-hop is the criticism of homosexuality and otherness through the sustainment of heteronormativity. My decision to include Kanye West in my thesis was based on my own understanding of his position in hip-hop during the onset of his career. West, an artist who is now commonly regarded as an egotistic masculinist, was actually one of the few artists to address the issue of homophobia in hip-hop culture. During a performance on his sold-out tour at Madison Square Garden in New York, Kanye urged his listeners to live open-mindedly:

> Open your minds. Be accepting of different people and let people be who they are
> [...] how you gonna say 'fag' right in front of a gay dude's face and act like that's
> ok. [It is] disrespectful. It is time to break out of the stereotypes, or the fear, the
> backlash that I would get if you don't believe in what I believe in: acceptin' people
> for who they are [...] open your minds and live a happier life. (2008)

Kanye's entry into the hip-hop industry in 2003 was illustrated by pink coloured Polos and tight-fitted jeans. At the time, I perceived Kanye's alternative attire as a form of social commentary on dominant hip-hop ideology. For critically-conscious hip-hop listeners like me, we questioned the legitimacy of hip-hop as a genuine art form that emphasized talent and creativity over image and physical appearance. Fortunately for Kanye West, his unconventional style seemingly gathered support throughout the years, and other artists

began to adopt the new style. Some artists, like Cam'Ron, even went as far as endorsing a pink t-shirt movement.

With regards to lyrical content that I interpreted, it can be argued that artists like Tupac were deconstructing preconceived notions of masculinity as early as the 1980s. The difference, however, with Kanye's critique of (hyper)masculinity, was its parallel with homophobia ever so present within hip-hop culture. For Tupac, the dissection of masculine ideology came in the form of advocating on behalf of gender equity and women's rights. For example, in his song, "Keep Ya Head Up", he raps:

> I think it's time to kill for our women, time to heal our women...be real to our women. And if we don't, we'll have a race of babies that will hate the ladies, that make the babies. And since a man can't make one, he has no right to tell a woman when and where to create one. So will the real men get up? I know you're fed up ladies, but keep your head up. (1993, 11)

In relation to ongoing perceptions of manliness as a means for dominance and authority over women, Tupac's verse is especially important considering it was written nearly 20 years ago. On the other hand, Kanye's lyrics pertaining to bonds between men are reflective of a larger social issue that labels emotionally-driven men as feminine or inadequate. For example, Kanye raps: "I feel like one day you'll understand me dogg, you can still love your man and be manly dogg" (2004, 20). In this case, Kanye's reinforcement of manly feelings is ultimately commenting on homophobia amongst *all* men in society. If the suppression of emotions is an expected act amongst men, how can anyone expect a sincere relationship between them?

Critically-Conscious Hip-Hop Through a CRT Framework

The role of critical race theory (CRT) in my thesis is to identify interlocking *isms* within the field of education through a counter-hegemonic approach. I focus primarily upon the use of CRT as a model for recognizing how educational matters like student disengagement are consequences of larger social issues like racism, classism, and sexism. As a result, CRT's resistance to the normative standard through oppositional scholarship (Ladson-Billings, 1995) is pertinent to the songs produced by critically-conscious hip-hop artists (Taylor, 1998). Furthermore, by carefully considering Ladson-Billings' (1998) research, aside from merely acknowledging issues of injustice, a CRT framework within classrooms ultimately seeks to explain continued inequities. Following a similar formula, the purpose of incorporating critically-conscious hip-hop lyrics into my thesis is to provide a comprehensive, yet clear-cut inquiry into hip-hop as an educational tool equipped with principles of social critique and social awareness.

What is more fascinating about critically-conscious hip-hop music is its ability to channel resistance to the discourse of inequality through critical race theory without the need for reinterpretation between these two lenses. Critically-conscious hip-hop music is an embodiment of critical race theory. When Tupac raps about classism, he simultaneously addresses the problem of racism. When he states his songs are "for the masses; the lower classes [who were] made to feel inferior, but are superior" (1991, 6), his fight against legitimizing the status quo is essentially a "definitional premise" (Closson, 2010, p. 262) for recognizing socioeconomic inequity. The social economic plight he is speaking about is in relation to inner city urban Blacks. With regards to the field of education, Tupac expresses his frustration with negligent curricula by rapping about "bring[ing] truth to the youth to

tear the roof off the whole school" (1993, 1). Purely from an interpretive and figurative standpoint, tearing the roof off of schools is an allusion to uncovering or exposing the educational inequities existent within urban schools. As a temporary alternative to educating youth on overlooked issues that plague our society today, Tupac offers an alternative to "nation building[...through]teaching children" (1991, 6).

From a CRT point of view, acknowledging issues of socioeconomic disparities, racism, and unresponsive curricula ultimately captures the injustices of a normalized educational model sanctioned by hegemony both inside and outside of schools. Tupac's lyrical teachings also intersect with Aoki's (1993) research on the lived curriculum. The lived curriculum situates students' experiences within an educational context to provide educators with an understanding of how student identities are shaped by external influences. The aim of this thesis is to persuade educators to think of ways that critically-conscious hip-hop music encourages students to engage with critical discourse and how educational strategies developed through critically-conscious music provide avenues to revise the current educational model.

The Past Is a Present: My Hip-Hop Muse

In the next portion of my thesis, I integrate excerpts of my earlier writing from high school to comment on the influence of critically-conscious hip-hop on my personal growth as a lifelong learner. I present my writing as evidence of early developmental signs of critical-consciousness and critical awareness. Moreover, presenting my entries in an impartial manner was especially important; in which remnants of mainstream hip-hop music that include hyper-masculinity is also apparent within my writing. In this case, the entries are introduced in the same format as the presentation of the critically-conscious hip-hop

songs selected above. Table 7 highlights key themes that pertain to critical-consciousness and sociopolitical critique. It is also important to examine how my written verses operate as counter-narratives that comment on issues of injustice, hopelessness, and disengagement.

Whether it was a lack of self-confidence, lack of direction, or a combination of both, the bulk of my writing was occupied with searching for a way *out*. Perhaps it was the hyper-masculine underpinnings of society and popular culture that distorted my development as a young man. Maybe it was my inability to decide upon which role I could identify with best. Was I a "thug"? A "nice guy"? A "tough guy"? A "player"? A "loser"? A "failure"? More importantly, how did the notion of not fitting into any of these predetermined categories become synonymous with the term "fag"? Why was homosexuality or otherness always implemented to define inadequacy? In retrospect, my fixation upon being anything *but* me was the definitive basis for my own shortcomings. From the perspective of a young teenager immersed in both mainstream and critically-conscious hip-hop music, there

Table 7

Exploring My Hip-Hop Muse

Date of Entry	Major Themes
February, 4th, 2003	-hopelessness and regret -teenage years as a vicious cycle -contemplating suicide as a "way out" -self-development through rebuilding -rejection of support or sympathy
November, 18th, 2004	-rap as "raw reflection" -taking an alternative approach or new path to hip-hop music -the correlation between hyper-masculinity and male violence/aggression -prevalence of hip-hop-related violence through mainstream music
January, 26th, 2005	-refusal to engage in illegal activities -making conscious decisions -deciphering right vs. wrong -dreams of becoming a leader -writing to educate future generations -condemning the gun culture within hip-hop
March, 3rd, 2005	-critique of socioeconomic issues -promoting change to find a "way out" -youth crime as a result of poor parenting -the inherent black/white binary in society -assumptions about rap as "blackness"
March, 30th, 2005	-an attempt to write verses without profanity -experiences learned through failure -relations with police, government, society, and assumptions about Indo-Canadians -critiquing drug (ab)use in society as a coping mechanism

was a constant struggle when I deciphered lyrical content. In a sense, I was caught in between two forces that did not exude equal amounts of power and influence. Mainstream hip-hop culture was everywhere; in magazines, on television, on the internet, and in the vocabulary and minds of my peers. It was not the type of mainstream hip-hop culture that was driven solely by music; but instead fuelled by the glorification of cars and jewellery along with the exploitation of women as disposable sex objects. Though my writing was not entirely consumed by the type of discourse that negated the purposeful nature of critically-conscious hip-hop, I was certainly predisposed to the effects of harmful music.

Preconceived notions of *all* hip-hop music being violent, sexualized, and irrational further complicated the issue of bringing critically-conscious hip-hop to the forefront within classrooms. I can recall one particular experience in my grade 11 Writer's Craft course when my teacher finally agreed (after weeks of persuasion) to discuss critically-conscious hip-hop with the entire class. My teacher asked me to name one song that was both educational and meaningful. After some careful deliberation, I selected "Dear Mama" by Tupac, and the teacher informed me that we would discuss the importance of the song within both a literary and sociocultural framework. The song, which covers topics like Tupac's adoration for his mother to conquering poverty through empowerment and faith, was played in class the next day. Expecting a change of heart from my teacher on her outlook on hip-hop music, she unexpectedly ridiculed the use of slang in the song and also critiqued its references to the crack epidemic. What had happened to extracting meaningful messages from the song? For a song with no profanity or harmful dialogue, how was my teacher's educational practice influenced by assumptions? It was official; negative images within the majority of mainstream hip-hop music had forever tainted an entire culture.

In one of my entries, the conception of part-time critical-consciousness is supported by my rationalization of drug use through socio-political critique: "sometimes I wonder why we live in such a black and white world...and still you wonder why I puff and make black and white swirls" (2005). Though the use of "black and white" is an indication of commentary on race relations in the 21st century, the term likely refers to the issue of conventional thought and conformity. Why do binaries exist? What are the implications of refusing to fit into assigned moulds constructed by society? On the other hand, the reference to "puff[ing] [to] make black and white swirls" (2005) is both an example of self-justification and critical awareness on the causes for my own destructive habits. However, popular hip-hop brought on elements of coolness and manliness that were defined by reckless behaviour. At the time, artists like 50 Cent and Eminem embodied popular hip-hop with their often brash demeanour and explicit lyrics. My life as a high school student did not mirror the lives of the artists that rapped about guns, violence, sex, and money. I engaged with these artists' lyrics strictly through a figurative lens; in which my self-esteem was falsely upheld by negative representations of what masculinity and gender relations entailed. I did not want to learn how to be a man; I wanted to learn how to be *me*. I wanted to explore why my critical awareness of my own destructive behaviour was not enough to stop me from engaging in it. The overpowering pressures associated with being a young man could only be uncovered through my exploration of critically-conscious hip-hop. My disengagement from a culturally irrelevant school curriculum and my interests in hip-hop pedagogy during high school constructed the theoretical framework for my thesis. Moreover, my hip-hop muse transformed into my outlet and critically-conscious hip-hop became a channel for reflecting on issues that affected me every day.

Perhaps the irony in my writing lies in the fact that my critique of a "black and white" society (2005) was likely powered by my black and white understanding of the world. I was a young man questioning our society with no answers or solutions to the problems. Slick Rick once rapped: "c'mon, have some understandin'. Society's a weak excuse for a man" (1989, 10). Although my angst was not entirely encapsulated by society's woes, Slick Rick had a valid point; why was I letting society's issues define the extent of my own happiness? If my destructive habits did not clearly establish my overall unhappiness with normalized facets of society, my earlier work that embodied suicidal ideation is a sincere outlook on the mindset of many youth today. Whether the seriousness of my situation was immense or not, I can still recall the sense of fulfilment associated with transmitting my feelings through writing at that particular moment in time. References like "you'll never see the original me that I used to be from '87 to '03" (2003) or "the early years of life just didn't seem that bright, still I walk alone, striving to meet the light" (2004) was a part of a transformative process that entailed a fresh start and a new form of thought. My unhappiness with society, being a young Indo-Canadian man in a post-9/11 world, coupled with personal trauma, could no longer define my identity as a young man. I began to think of a "fresh start" as a method for generating awareness on the issues that needed to be addressed. I began envisioning multiple ways of incorporating the realities of racism, sexism, drug abuse, and mental health into my hip-hop muse through a critically-conscious lens.

The "fresh start" that I was longing for was also likely an expression to highlight my quest for academic success and personal growth as a critical thinker. Perhaps this new outlook was one of the key reasons for why the majority of my writing after 2003 seemingly

engaged with more positive and direct discourse that focused on social inequity as a preventable force. For example, written in 2005, one piece specifically comments on social improvements through dedication: "and yet it may sound strange, but what if we found a way to make it out and promote change? […] am I the only person willing to devote days?" (2005). Whether change came in the form of quiet dissonance or revolutionary protests, one key element in my writing was certain: change was facilitated by time and effort. The question in my writing, however, was whether people were willing to devote time for creating equitable spaces in our schools and communities. This particular theme of enacting meaningful change through awareness and social commentary is reminiscent of the lyrics discussed earlier in this chapter. Many of the messages in my own writing were in fact by-products of critically-conscious hip-hop artists' music.

In one entry titled "How to Live", the simplicity of my writing conveys an expressive tone that is largely absent from my other entries:

It's the little things that make life worth living. The simple things that make life worth giving. A pat on the back to boost the mood to a high. Just a simple smile will help you get by. To lead a good life, live simple, move slow. Let pain embrace you, but let strength shine through. Let courage be your friend, it'll bring wisdom to you. Breathe in the warmth of summer and exhale the winter winds. Let the light of love glow, and ensure it never dims. (2004)

My goal, then, as a writer and as a recipient of critical-consciousness, was to create critically-conscious perpetuity that transcended the music industry and entered into classrooms. Like the example above, the element of empowerment rang truer than ever in my writing that promoted leadership and optimism:

Sit back and relax, write a verse, and meditate. Think positive, and try to eliminate the hate. Write words to educate, for generations to relate, state of mind, mind of state, being different is so great. Be good to yourself, and others who guide you. Respect and be grateful, these rules apply too. Take great pride in your work, and everything you do. Be the best you can be, or at least try to. (2005)

Though I would argue that any form of writing serves as an outlet for self-expression, the art of writing poetry and verses combines social commentary and empowerment with literary devices like rhyme, metaphor, assonance, alliteration, imagery, and symbolism. Yet, aside from the benefits of writing from a literary standpoint, the art of constructing this type of work is undoubtedly an agent for self-exploration.

In my own writing, which was grounded in Tupac's tenets on empowerment through education, there was an element of desperation that explored ways to express myself in a constructive manner for my teachers. The problem, however, was the stigma surrounding hip-hop as both a form of music and as a legitimate tool for educating youth. The process of writing without sharing consequently led to the repression of creativity in school. How could I force myself to be passionate about a curriculum when it failed to recognize any of my own academic aspirations? After all, my unimposing school averages during my high school years likely spoke volumes about my disengagement with school. Though disheartened and aware of my position within the classroom as an unresponsive student, I had gradually recognized the importance of not letting *them* win. In this case, regardless of race, age, gender, or sexual orientation, "them" referred to anyone who sought normativity through hegemony. While my interests in critically-conscious hip-hop were rather restricted by stringent program requirements in university, I managed to merge hip-hop culture with a

large amount of my work. In essence, I had involuntarily adopted a learning approach that

allowed me to investigate matters primarily through a critically-conscious lens by using

Henry Louis Gates' theory on "slipping the yoke" (p. 204) to often abandon hip-hop culture

in order to satisfy my instructors and in turn use it to critique dominant discourse. Perhaps

half of the battle was with myself as I was spiritedly searching for ways to share the gift of

writing as a release mechanism; a release from the mundane way of thinking about hip-hop,

and a release from ineffective educational practices.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of my thesis was to explore why student disengagement exists in classrooms, how critically-conscious hip-hop promotes student engagement, and what approaches could be taken to integrate critically-conscious hip-hop into contemporary curricula. My research on hip-hop lyrics and artists' understanding of their environment from both a social and political perspective assisted with envisioning critically-conscious hip-hop in classrooms as meaningful discourse. When I began planning my thesis outline, I maintained a sensible understanding of its implications and potential influence on the field of education. I was certain that my work could effectively generate awareness on inequities in classrooms and also provide new directives for school curricula that emphasized Aoki's (1993) work on the importance of meshing a "lived curriculum with curriculum-as-plan" (p. 257). Likewise, I was also confident that critically-conscious hip-hop and education did not begin in the classroom; it began with an understanding of hip-hop discourse as a misconstrued and distorted art form with often unacknowledged valuable principles.

The first step, then, for my thesis and development as a scholar, was to recognize the painstaking process of introducing critically-conscious hip-hop to educators who initiate classroom dialogue every day. As a result, my thesis was constructed through a multifaceted approach; in which the proposal for integrating hip-hop into classrooms was indefinitely a consequence of socially and culturally unresponsive curricula. It was important to consider the current classroom climate in schools and also explore *why* the current curriculum was not adequate for all students. I had to draw upon evidence to make a case for disengaged students by illustrating how critically-conscious hip-hop music could inform both student learning and educational practices. I was aware that it was necessary to successfully

advocate for critically-conscious hip-hop and simultaneously address misconceptions and preconceived notions about the entire culture of hip-hop.

Though I set out to provide answers for all of these questions from a personal standpoint, I was aware of the importance of incorporating existing literature that discussed hip-hop and education. The existing research that stemmed from students' personal narratives (Hallman, 2009) ultimately assembled the foundation for looking at hip-hop as an interpretive framework for educating and empowering students. Because my thesis was a theoretical analysis, it was difficult to decipher the context of students' entries without being able to speak to them. I was keen on learning more about hip-hop's impact on their identities and how hip-hop had involuntarily transformed into their outlet for self-expression. What other benefits could students draw upon with regards to critically-conscious hip-hop? What were the potential setbacks? How did these students feel about the homogenization of hip-hop as entirely misogynistic, violent, and hyper-sexualized? Instead of interviewing students, I investigated my own critically-conscious hip-hop muse and I accepted this thesis as a critical part of my personal and academic growth as an emerging hip-hop scholar of education. The quest for knowledge is undoubtedly a facet of self-motivation and the desire to enact meaningful change. However, my goal for bringing hip-hop to the forefront of all classrooms is purely an uninterrupted journey that seeks social and cultural legitimacy of critically-conscious hip-hop as a source for both teaching and learning.

Research Implications

One of the underlying themes in my thesis was the advocacy for a culturally relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1992) teaching approach in place of a positivist (Hinchey, 2010) one.

Incorporating critically-conscious hip-hop into classrooms has the potential to intersect with several arguments for reworking the curriculum. For example, scholars like Dei (1997), who research curricula primarily through a critical race theory lens, may take a similar approach for researching the overall inadequacy of educational practices. The multiplicity of research lenses available for examining unresponsive classrooms presents a cohesive argument for challenging an educational system that simply does not work (Hallman, 2009). In this case, my research took on an approach in which I tailored my work to clarify the issue at hand in five stages: the statement/significance of the problem, evidence for the existence of the problem, methods for researching and understanding the problem, possible solutions for achieving equitable practices, and the implications of the proposed solutions in my thesis.

After stating the problem in Chapter One, I focused heavily on providing examples of how intersectionality and cultural capital played a role in determining the level of student engagement. Moreover, I considered the importance of acknowledging culturally relevant teaching and learning approaches that have been disregarded by the majority of schools across North America. For many students, learning about language and literature through Tupac Shakur can promote in-class engagement that conventional ways of teaching cannot.

As stated earlier in Chapter Four of this thesis, an understanding of the position of the artists I discussed must be recognized before attempting to decode their music. The position of young, minority status men from low-income backgrounds must then be acknowledged from both an educational standpoint and within a socio-political context. These are artists with histories; their stories are reminiscent of personal experiences, critique, and commentary on social injustices that provide new directives for the field of education. Although my thesis did not include empirical research with human participants, I

do envision students who find inspiration through critically-conscious hip-hop artists as contributors in my future research endeavours. Through greater awareness amongst enlightened educators, we can recognize the importance of re-examining the planned curriculum in ways that include student voices in a lived curriculum that, as Aoki (1993) suggests, supports critical hip-hop pedagogy as a legitimate approach to teaching.

Looking back on my thesis, I consider it merely as introductory work that encourages further research in the field of hip-hop and education in Canada. In addition to this, my research provided me with an opportunity to grasp skills, knowledge, and experience acquired through the creation of this thesis. It was also helpful to reflect upon my hip-hop muse because it contextualized the latter part of Chapter Four within a specific timeframe where feelings of ambivalence and hopelessness rang truer than ever before. The enlivening experience, however, lay in the process of looking back in hindsight and understanding how critical-consciousness played a role in shaping my identity. Though I was not entirely safe from the harmful effects of popular media and mainstream hip-hop dialogue, my sense of awareness on the relevance of issues addressed in critically-conscious hip-hop music bolstered my desire to promote positive change through writing. When I conceived the notion of incorporating my own writing into my research, I was committed to presenting it in an impartial manner. Many of my entries did not discuss multiple angles for critical inquiry and active engagement with social issues; instead, they were purely written on the basis of egotism and male bravado. This, in turn, situated my identity as both a high school student and a writer within a framework of ambiguity. My reluctance to share my thoughts and experiences on sociopolitical matters was partially hindered by an ostensible need to assert coolness through hyper-masculinity.

When I began working on this thesis, I understood that the incorporation of culturally relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1992) teaching approaches (like hip-hop pedagogy) into Canadian classrooms would be a gradual process. Like any form of change, reworking educational curricula entails further research, social awareness, and practical methods for introducing new ways of approaching the art of educating. It is only when all three components of this transformational process are realized that hip-hop pedagogy can gain a legitimate place in student learning and teaching approaches.

Current Initiatives

Hip-hop has made significant progress over time within the field of education (Hall, 2009). Although there is stigma associated with hip-hop culture in general, one of the key initiatives for its integration into schools is generating awareness by educating others. For example, Dr. Emery Petchauer (2010), an assistant professor of Education at Lincoln University, challenged four common misconceptions of hip-hop based education. The misconceptions ranged from considering hip-hop culture as merely rap music to questioning hip-hop's association with offensive material. Petchauer (2010) addresses these areas of concern through his acknowledgment of hip-hop pedagogy as a growing body of educational work:

> Hip-hop culture encompasses much more than rap music. Hip-hop and educational practices that spring from it indeed include the wide variety of linguistic features of rapping/emceeing, but they also include forms of dance, visual art, and music production. Hip-hop does not bring questionable content into the classroom. It was already there. The esteemed Western canon of literature contains ample instances of violence, misogyny, and moral abasement to the degree that the clearly objectionable

and deeply problematic strands of rap music would actually fit right in. [Consider] Macbeth's murder spree, sexual promiscuity in The Canterbury Tales, and the "N-word" in its historical usage in To Kill a Mockingbird---Mobb Deep has nothing on 10th Grade English. (para. 2)

Petchauer's (2010) analysis of hip-hop from both a linguistic and artistic perspective uncovers the rudimentary elements of conscious hip-hop that are often homogenized and perceived as customary mainstream rap music. More importantly, Petchauer's critique of Western educational ideology confronts popular assumptions of a normalized curriculum as conducive to student learning. Petchauer insists that a parallel between violence in hip-hop and literature must exist in order to situate the discourse within a particular framework. For example, a hip-hop song graphically highlighting personal strife through portrayals of community violence should first be contextualized by educators before discussing its lyrical content. One could argue that if Macbeth commits to a killing spree to uphold his position of power and reassert his masculinity, then rappers who portray images of violence in their neighbourhoods should not be focal points when discussing violence in popular culture and literature. Nevertheless, it is important to note that portraying images of violence is different than blatantly rapping about acting out in a violent fashion to either reaffirm positions of power or sell the phenomenon of coolness. Since there is no rational way of justifying the glorification of violence and misogyny, critically-conscious hip-hop artists' lyrics about precarious upbringings must be acknowledged as reflections of personal experiences and histories. For educators like Petchauer, there is an inherent commitment to pedagogical practices that promote innovation and student engagement within the classroom.

With regards to critically-conscious hip-hop outside of the classroom, tools like workbooks and developmental activities have made efforts to reconcile hip-hop based education with conventional forms of teaching. The Rhapsody Program, a hip hop afterschool program and two-week summer camp based in Cleveland, Ohio, "offers instruction in the hip-hop arts, including turntablism, graffiti, dance, and lyricism" (Gosa & Fields, 2012, p. 6). Similar initiatives like The Underground Railroad Program in Oakland, California, emphasize efforts to address schooling issues:

> because they are not classroom-based, emphasis is placed on promoting self-efficacy. In addition, supplementary hip hop programs keep youth off the streets and engaged in educational activities. Thus, they function to prevent the out-of-school causes of the learning gaps found in these populations. (Gosa & Fields, 2012, p. 7)

While these programs serve as out-of-school supports for youth, H.E.L.P (Hip-Hop Education Literacy Program) (2011) is a learning tool developed by educators in the United States to reengage socially and culturally diverse youth within classrooms. With over ten comprehensive workbooks, H.E.L.P is dedicated to providing "culturally relevant teaching materials [for meeting] the ever-changing needs and demands of the 21st century classroom" (2012, para. 1). H.E.L.P provides the "teaching tools [that] are critical to the success of teachers who are committed to student engagement and student achievement" (2012, para. 5). As a result, using hip-hop lyrics in workbooks to facilitate students' personal and academic development is an accessible tool for critically-conscious educators.

Because programs like H.E.L.P recognize the importance of educators' knowledge of critically-conscious hip-hop, each student workbook is accompanied by a teacher's guide. The purpose of the guide is to familiarize educators with hip-hop by including "artist

biographies, discussion questions, annotated lyrics, vocabulary words, writing rubrics, scope and sequence, suggested supplemental reading lists, and pre- and post- assessments" (2012, para. 2). With programs like H.E.L.P, there is an underlying sense of hope for infusing hip-hop with education to benefit disengaged students. With increasing workloads for educators, the implementation of a H.E.L.P guide can assist them with carrying out critically-conscious hip-hop dialogue into classrooms to achieve cultural relevance. This, in turn, leaves minimal space for using workload as a pretext to continue with an unresponsive curriculum.

In this thesis, I have consistently used words like *inequitable*, *unresponsive*, and *exclusionary* to describe North American secondary school curricula. Nevertheless, initiatives taken by educational boards such as the Ontario Ministry of Education must be acknowledged in order to provide a sensible understanding of current educational directives. In 2009, the Ontario Ministry of Education released "Equity and Inclusive Education in Ontario Schools", which is a thorough guide that sought equitable teaching practices through policy development and implementation. The guide outlines three main principles for educational reform: "high levels of student achievement, reduced gaps in student achievement, and increased public confidence in publicly funded education" (2009, p. 5). In addition to this, the guide also focuses heavily on eliminating racism from schools:

> We need to work collectively to realize our vision of an equitable and inclusive education system, and to eliminate all types of systemic barriers from Ontario's schools and society. The new equity and inclusive education strategy aims to close student achievement gaps by identifying and eliminating any biases, barriers, and power dynamics that may limit students' prospects for learning, growing, and contributing fully to society. (2009, p. 10)

The guide takes a pragmatic approach in addressing issues like racism and ableism in schools and is supportive for generating awareness on the importance of equitable learning spaces through inclusive education.

In section 3 of the guide, it states that "competency in recognizing social issues outside of schools and their impact on classroom climate is ideal for creating socially and culturally responsive classrooms" (2009, p. 62). The following compilation of self-reflection tools located in the guide is also specifically designed for educators:

[equitable learning spaces] treat people fairly, equitably, and with dignity and respect, leads by example, modelling Gospel values, foster an open, fair, and equitable culture, communicate effectively with a diverse range of people, including the public and the media, demonstrate cultural competency, the impact of change on organizations and individuals, [and] commitment to shared servant leadership. (2009, p. 60)

The implementation of these policies to combat discrimination and simultaneously understand the scope of sociocultural fluidity is a reasonable approach to achieving equitable learning spaces. After reviewing the guide, I would argue that there is minimal emphasis on discussing *how* discrimination is a consequence of social interactions, cultural variance, and politics. Templates for practices such as cultural accommodation are by no means ineffective; they assure a welcoming environment where students can feel comfortable in their learning space. However, the next step in achieving open dialogue within classrooms and improved student-teacher relations would witness educators engaging with discourse that is outside of their everyday practice. In essence, accommodating students' interests in critically-conscious hip-hop by acknowledging its

existence is contrary to researching hip-hop, engaging with it, and integrating it into the classroom. Perhaps the process of sparking student engagement is more so a trait of educators' personal pedagogical practices rather than institutionalized initiatives. Nonetheless, the experiences, histories, and knowledge of each student must first be understood and appreciated in order to attain accessible and responsive classrooms.

Future Research

Before I began writing my thesis, I developed my own academic goals for the future that would in turn allow me to continue researching critically-conscious hip-hop in education. My goals include: pursuing my interests in hip-hop and education at the doctoral level and working with youth who engage with hip-hop discourse. After considering the immensity of my subject area, I refined the scope of my study and decided to construct a conceptual analysis on critically-conscious hip-hop through CDA, CRT, and counter-storytelling. There are countless methods for approaching the issue of student disengagement and unresponsive classrooms. However, a key factor for conducting a conceptual analysis was for my own benefit as an inexperienced researcher within the field. As a result, this thesis enabled me to grasp hip-hop-based education fundamentals and also allowed me to familiarize myself with tenets of critical discourse analysis and critical race theory.

The topic of hip-hop within an educational context is progressive in nature because of critically-conscious hip-hop's fluidity. Hip-hop creates space for constantly-shifting phenomenon through dialogue within music. This dialogue, in turn, is organic for scholars pursuing knowledge on the intricate relationship between hip-hop discourse and dominant discourse within schools. For future research, it would be helpful to conduct a study on hip-

hop-based education from the perspective of educators. Though I briefly alluded to preconceived notions of hip-hop culture, acknowledging educators' outlook on critically-conscious hip-hop would be conducive to culturally responsive classrooms. In this case, research on high school educators through participant studies may put hip-hop into perspective for those unfamiliar with the field of study. The purpose of the study would be not to focus solely on educators' assumptions of hip-hop culture, but instead represent advocates of critically-conscious hip-hop who seek to correct misconceptions through education and awareness.

With regards to my future research endeavours, I am committed to researching the area of hip-hop and education further through working with youth affected in a positive way by critically-conscious hip-hop music. Although I was able to incorporate valuable research into this thesis, the opportunity to personally interview participants on the topic of hip-hop would be helpful. Future research with active participants may also be conducted in a way that takes students' creativity into account by including their written reflections/verses/rap recordings as data for my study.

Personal Reflections

While the research portion of this thesis began during my undergraduate career, my advocacy for critically-conscious hip-hop commenced several years ago during my time in high school. My thesis is central to my individual identity as it exudes elements of self-development through critical-consciousness and lived experiences. The motivation that sparked my interests in this field of study was consequential of obstructive experiences within classrooms. The frustration with not having a fair opportunity at studying culturally relevant discourse made it nearly impossible to anticipate engagement in school. My

journey as a high school and university student could be best described by my attempts at persuading educators to embrace critically-conscious hip-hop in its purest form; the raw, untainted, purposeful form that lacks concern for commercial success and mass exposure. My unsuccessful attempts at inserting critically-conscious hip-hop discourse into a mainstream curriculum was in fact a step forward for generating awareness about the problem of a disengaging curriculum. After researching contemporary critically-conscious hip-hop music, I came to the realization that finding hip-hop without an accompanying record label influencing the authenticity of the music was a difficult task. As a result, I focused heavily on critically-conscious hip-hop as a grassroots movement from the late 1980s and onwards. The purpose for analyzing hip-hop within this time period was to capture the essence of critical inquiry during a time of crisis that embodied the post-civil rights movement era, along with the crack epidemic and forthcoming Los Angeles riots.

While the songs selected for this study were conducive to critical-consciousness through hip-hop, limiting my scope to a handful of songs was difficult with the abundance of available hip-hop music. The songs included in this study are indeed a fraction of a larger phenomenon; in which each song was carefully selected to serve as a representation for a broader issue. For example, my goal for song selection was to integrate numerous dialogical areas that addressed issues like masculine discourse, homophobia, and race relations in the last 20 years. Though each song did not outwardly combat issues of socio-political inequity, I would argue that addressing stigmatized issues is a step forward in relinquishing popular assumptions about hip-hop culture. This practice is also supportive for providing avenues for improved student-teacher relations. The lived curriculum, according to Aoki (1993), can situate students' experiences within an educational context to provide educators with an

understanding of how student identities and interests are shaped by external influences. With the notion of hip-hop music operating as a tool for generating awareness, there is an opportunity for educators to move beyond acknowledgement and break into action by undertaking approaches for creating and maintaining cultural responsiveness within classrooms (Ladson-Billings, 1992).

One of the benefits of conducting research in this particular field is that it correlates with my professional role as a Support Worker with Toronto youth. In some cases, the process of understanding the hip-hop effect is in fact fostered by my exposure to youth on a daily basis. Whether certain forms of hip-hop are transmitting hazardous messages to youth or empowering them through sociopolitical critique, the relevance of hip-hop outside of schools today is unquestionable. As a result, I envisioned potential programming that could work conjointly with a larger organization to address issues of violence and gender expectations through hip-hop dialogue. Perhaps this will someday unfold into research that would facilitate my work as a PhD candidate or as an independent writer. Nevertheless, the accessibility of hip-hop as a field of study is imperative for scholars who are planning on pursuing research on its influence on youth. Whether scholars choose to argue *for* or *against* hip-hop in schools, the more important aspect of its place in schools is understanding critically-conscious hip-hop as autonomous and contrary to mainstream hip-hop ideology.

The study of critically-conscious hip-hop, from a theoretical perspective, embodies counter-hegemonic discourse and rejects homogeneity to promote engagement within classrooms. Along with the exposure to hip-hop through my professional role, my personal interests in hip-hop music and literature also play a major role in shaping my identity as a researcher. The position of critically-conscious hip-hop from a personal standpoint is

ultimately the bridge between social realities and escapism. Because the content within this form of hip-hop is often potent in a literary sense, the occasional moments of enjoying critically-conscious hip-hop simply for its music is harmonious. In addition to this, my fascination with critically-conscious hip-hop primarily stems from its often subtle commentary as an effort for reminding listeners about systems of inequity and oppression.

Like my incessant scholarly journey as both a researcher and lifelong learner, there is simply no discernible beginning or end to this thesis. This thesis is entwined in a larger field of study that seeks culturally responsive learning through awareness and action. It is, however, important to note that I have not lost track of how much individual progress I have made over the last 10 years. The initial feeling of uncertainty associated with pursuing my research interests at a graduate level resonate even today. In particular, during my first semester as a graduate student working two jobs, critically-conscious hip-hop functioned as my unwavering coping mechanism. At the time, working full-time in retail and making minimum wage to chip away at student debt was my real world. The sense of entitlement that freely matured after my undergraduate spring convocation had deceived me; I was not prepared to face social realities outside of the classroom. Yet, in retrospect, nearly 2 years later, I appreciate what the common struggle helped me achieve. Some of my best writing as both a student and writer emerged from a time period when I was vulnerable; coinciding with my vulnerability as a high school student searching for an alternative way of learning and interacting with classroom discourse.

The purpose of my thesis was to illustrate critically-conscious hip-hop as a literary and interpretive tool for learning. This thesis focused on tracing inequitable learning conditions within schools that continue to limit students' creativity and engagement levels.

There is an undeniable rapport between youth and hip-hop that is often regarded as counterproductive and undeserving. This thesis set out to challenge these preconceived notions of hip-hop while also examining its critically-conscious facets that can be applied to classroom learning. My hope is that this thesis will genuinely encourage educators to promote critically-conscious hip-hop within classrooms for the benefit of enhancing critical thinking and inquiry skills while amplifying student engagement. For this thesis, attempting to fathom the importance of my work from both a professional and personal standpoint was a difficult task. When I included a subheading in Chapter Four titled "The Past Is a Present", I was commenting on past lived experiences as an agent for determining future successes. As I look over some of my written reflections as a young teenager, one particular quotation catches my attention as I survey the loose pages on my lap: "what if we found a way to make it out and promote change?" (2005). That is, change that characterizes equity through acceptance, unity, and a collaborative effort.

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