

The Critical Cultural Cypher: Remaking Paulo Freire's Cultural Circles Using Hip Hop Culture

by
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K-12 education has not changed much in the United States in last 100 years (Cuban, 1993), and it still utilizes a model that strives to maintain education's dominant and decidedly middle-class, Eurocentric discourse (Banks, 1993; Murrell, 2002; Sleeter, 1996). This lack of change is stunning when considering the constantly evolving landscape of popular culture. One way of rectifying the inadequacies of the education system for students of differing cultural backgrounds is to incorporate elements of students' lived culture in the school curriculum, forming a *Culturally Congruent Curriculum* (Demmert & Towner, 2003; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995; McLeod, 1994) that acknowledges, values, and incorporates students' identities outside of schools. This curriculum could be followed by a Critical Pedagogical framework (Freire, 2003; Kincheloe, 2008; Shor, 1992) that would empower the students, together with the teachers, to challenge marginalizing social contexts, ideologies, events, organizations, experiences, texts, subject matters, policies, and discourses.

Many students today are choosing cultural affiliations that often put them in opposition to a mainstream academic culture. Multicultural educator Banks (1993) mentions mainstream academic culture when speaking about the disconnect between students' home culture and the culture that governs the schools. I would add that the same differences can be found between students' lived culture and the mainstream academic culture. If we look at Bourdieu's (1977) notion of cultural capital, which he states is the valuation and commodification of culture, mainstream academic culture privileges certain ways of being, while other ways of being are deemed deficient. Hip Hop culture has been deemed deficient in the

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eyes of many academics, but it is the location where many students today call home.

Hip Hop culture was founded on a foundation of rebellion and opposition to cultural and economic oppression (Chang, 2005; George, 1998; Keyes, 2002; Rose, 1994), and today, the youth continue to identify and associate as members of Hip Hop culture. This affiliation is widespread and diverse. In a survey of youth in the United States, Cohen, Celestine-Michener, Holmes, Merseth & Ralph (2007) found that 58% of Black youth listen to rap music every day, compared to 45% of Hispanic youth and 23% of White youth. Extrapolating those numbers further, they found that 97% of Black youth, 88% of Hispanic youth, and 81% of White youth report listening to some rap music (Cohen et al., 2007). They found that a significant majority of the youth today are connecting to Hip Hop to express their cultural identity. However, in classrooms in the United States, these students are finding themselves on the wrong side of the cultural domination that is prevalent within U.S. school systems. In fact, the discourse of mainstream academic culture is layered with values and beliefs that are often in opposition to values from Hip Hop culture (e.g., rugged individualism vs. community empowerment). This disconnect serves to alienate many students today in a place, the classroom, where we should be engaging them.

One way of addressing this reproductive cycle of oppression is to engage students in a critical analysis of the cycle and its effects. The classroom is a logical location for such analysis because of the classroom's connections to knowledge and knowledge construction. Taking my lead from Freire (2002), I worked to remember the circles (Williams, 2008) using the students' lived culture as the foundational element upon which the circles would be built. Hip Hop culture is the lens through which many students today seek meaning, acceptance, and belonging, which in turn, posits Hip Hop as one of the most important, but underutilized cultural lenses that teachers can employ for the development of a critical consciousness. This being said, Hip Hop culture became the starting point upon which the "new circles" would be built for a project I called "The C³ Project."

The C³ Project: The Theoretical Foundations of the Critical Cultural Cipher—Freire and Hip Hop Culture: From the Education of the Hip Hop Culture towards Hip Hop Cultural Education

Any exploration into the work of Paulo Freire must begin by investigating not only of his words, but also how he lived his life as a commitment to the principles he espoused. In Freire's formative years, he often reflected on the poverty of his own youth and his surroundings, searching for ways to address the disenfranchisement of poor people. At this same time he was introduced to Marxist philosophy, which gave him a critique of the systems of power that maintained an asymmetrical power relationship between poor and privileged people. Com-

binning his Marxist influence and his background in German Philosophy with his deeply held religious beliefs, he fought against inequality in the field of education. His revolutionary literacy work in rural Angicos challenged the military dictatorship to the point that he was expelled from his native home. A year after being expelled, Freire wrote his classic text, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, in which he detailed parts of his framework.

The heart of Freire's liberatory literacy framework is found in his problem posing, dialogical approach. Freire (2003) problematized what he termed "a banking concept of education," in which teachers simply deposited information into the minds of students (p. 72). In this sense, he argued that typical classroom teachers viewed their students as blank slates and as such, they felt their job was to "deposit" rather than "draw out" knowledge. This approach ignores students' prior knowledge, skills, and interests and constitutes a form of oppressive dehumanization, according to Freire. Oppression was evidenced in an educational setting by marginalized people's tendency to subjugate their own experiences to the privileged responses that held value in the eyes of the dominant class that governed the educational system (Freire, 2003). Some teachers, in Freire's view, represented the cultural hegemony of the dominant society. The hegemonic dominance of the privileged class's way of being, thinking, and doing was seen as a problem that Freire was seeking to resolve through a problem-posing methodology, which "is the antithesis of the technocrat's 'problem solving' stance" (Goulet, 2002, p. ix). In other words, teachers are taught not to profess to possess answers, but to look within the students and their lived experiences to pose problems for the students to solve. Another key aspect of this approach is that educators should have the utmost deference to and respect for the existential situation of their students. Educators must not place their own experiences in the center. The problem-posing method, according to Freire, allows teachers to move their students toward *conscientização*—a critical consciousness which is not only a goal, but also a method which serves to humanize both the oppressed and the oppressor by providing both with a more democratic and liberating method of exchanging knowledge. Students who possess this critical consciousness possess the ability to not only "read the word," but they can also "read the world" through a critical lens (Freire, 1998).

While speaking around the world about education and liberation, Freire was invited out of exile and was appointed by the government as Minister of Education in São Paulo, Brazil, where he oversaw two-thirds of the nation's literacy program. Freire's literacy program, which he dubbed a "cultural circle," was used to move participants from objects to subjects in their learning. A subject is someone who "has the capacity to adapt oneself to reality *plus* the critical capacity to make choices and transform [their] reality" (Freire, 2002, p. 4). This is in opposition to an object that is subjected to the choices of others and is forced to adapt to prearranged circumstances. Because illiteracy was a significant problem in Brazil, Freire linked literacy to the mission of the cultural circle along with conscientiza-

ção. In the beginning of the process, the cultural circle was not used to develop literacy in the traditional sense of the word (reading and writing), but to develop cultural literacy, a process through which participants would identify issues that impacted their daily lives. Through dialogue, the participants and the coordinator of the cultural circle together would either “clarify situations or seek action arising from that clarification” (Freire, 2002, p. 42). The topics were presented to the participants using visual aids and, through the dialogue, they would formulate actions that could be taken to address the empowerment of the individuals within the group.

The process of *consientização*, though, does not end with the completion of the cultural circle because regardless of the transformation of the participants within the circle setting, the participant is still connected to a system of oppression: formal education is one such system of oppression. When read in Portuguese, Freire defines the oppression within education as a virus and the people as the host. This virus is within everyone connected to the system and the only way to eliminate this virus is for the oppressed to engage the oppressors in more humanizing joint practices (Correa, 2004). This is the only way to virtually unplug from the system and redefine your self. But, unplugging is sometimes a violent¹ and gradual process. As Stokes (1997) points out:

Freire makes clear that consciousness of oppression, alone, does not create freedom; and education, alone, does not transform society. The means to liberation, however, require an understanding that is “steeped in the dialectical movement back and forth between consciousness and world.” (p. 205)

The back and forth that Stokes (1997) talks about involves another process that is essential to Freire’s framework, which is the joining of critical reflection and action through praxis described by Heaney (1995) as the cycle of “action-reflection-action which is central to liberatory education” (p. 10).

Outside of Brazil, a similar movement was taking shape: Beginning in the streets of New York, African-American and Latino youth were constructing a culture in their own image. Gritty and resistant to the oppressive systems they faced, Hip Hop culture has grown from its roots in a single borough of New York City into a worldwide cultural movement that has been recognized for its breadth and depth by the United Nations (KRS-One, 2003). Hip Hop has become an important site for understanding youth who are under its widespread influence.

As educators begin to grapple with the growth of Hip Hop, they are finding ways to tap into Hip Hop’s power and its potential as a tool for the development of critical consciousness. Hip Hop culture has begun to creep into the classrooms (as well as more informal sites of education) in three distinct ways: First, Hip Hop has found its way into after-school programs where the teachers are taking

1. I am using “violent” not to represent a physical confrontation, but violent defined as acting with or marked by or resulting from great force or energy or emotional intensity.

an entrepreneurial approach by working with students as they construct their own music and expressions and become participants in the Hip Hop industry (Anderson, 2004). Second, Hip Hop has been used inside formalized classrooms to scaffold subject matter at both the elementary and secondary levels (Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2002). Third, Hip Hop is used in classrooms to introduce a critical analysis of systemic forms of oppression that pervert our society (Stovall, 2006).

The integration of Hip Hop into mainstream academic settings has faced many obstacles, namely commercial Hip Hop's use of misogynistic, homophobic, ultra-violent, drug-promoting and greed-supporting lyrics. If one were to look at the top selling and most popular Hip Hop artists, it would not be hard to find examples of negativity strewn throughout their music. Academics (McWhorter, 2003; Sowell, 2005) and journalists (Crouch, 2003; Malkin, 2007) have denounced Hip Hop music for its negative impact on youth culture and, at times, it is easy to see why (although both Hip Hop artists and the music industry that promotes and benefits from it are to blame for the music's excesses). What is needed is a comprehensive, critical, and complex look at the systemic functioning of Hip Hop culture in order to analyze its effects and influences on youth today; more specifically, there is a need to uncover Hip Hop culture's effects and influences on the development of a consciously critical identity for youth.

The Development of an Identity that is Consciously Critical

When thinking about the development of an identity that is consciously critical, I reflect back to my initial observations of my participants in their social studies classes. In those initial days of observation, I saw the participants in class using a critical lens to deconstruct some of the information that they were receiving. Race and gender counter-narratives were being expressed by some of the students, but when I asked them about their lens, they informed me that they did not realize that the philosophies that they expressed had historical and educational relevance. It was then that my thinking concretized, as I saw definitively that the students were living critical and social theorists, but that they were not consciously making the connections in formats that were valued by mainstream academic institutions. The tools and the skills were in place, but the students needed to understand their own strengths and how to utilize those strengths in ways that build academic capital. It is here that I attempt to develop a coherent understanding of the processes by which students develop a critical awareness of their own lives and how this awareness shapes the development of their identities inside and outside of mainstream academic settings.

Identity is a fluid term and its employment as a researchable variable is tentative at best (Blumer, 1969), but Sfard and Prusak's (2005) definition of identity as narrative helps move this research away from the investigation of identity as a stagnant construct and towards the study of students as active agents who can take control of the construction of their own being. The "critical" component in

a consciously critical identity lies with the students' ability to develop an understanding of how they interact with oppression in their lived reality (Freire, 2003). This critical identity is consciously and actively constructed through an interrogation of Hip Hop culture, which can be seen as a collective discourse understood and influenced by youth culture in the United States (Cohen et al., 2007; Kelly, 1997; Kitwana, 2004).

An Overview of The C³ Project's Goals

In The C³ Project study, I investigated how Critical Hip Hop Pedagogy (Stovall, 2006; Williams 2005) was used to engage students in a discourse of enlightenment, which helped to cultivate the development of three identified loci of interest which served to be the foundational components of what I am calling a consciously critical identity. Using components of both Critical Social theories (Agger 2006; Crossley 2005; Leonardo, 2004; Outlaw, 2005) and Critical Race theories (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Lynn, 1999; Solórzano & Yosso, 2000) as the theoretical framework, three loci of influence were identified and utilized as developmental milestones for The C³ Project. Participants would look to:

1. Develop their use of counter-narratives—counter-narratives are both a method of communication and also analysis from an alternative perspective that is less oppressive and more inclusive (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001);
2. Develop a language of critique and transcendence—Leonardo (2004) touts a language of critique and transcendence as an essential component of a quality education, as it serves to expose the limitations of our social formation and searching for interstices of possibility in institutions and agency in individuals; and
3. Develop *consientização*, which translates loosely (loosely because there is no exact translation from Portuguese to English) to the development of the awakening of a critical awareness (Freire, 2002).

Having covered Freireian Theory and the development of *consientização* earlier, I will limit the explanation to the first two components of a consciously critical identity.

Critical Race Theory and the Use of Counter-Narratives

Critical Race Theory (CRT) began as a legal discourse through which the inequities of societal systems of power were interrogated through a racialized lens (Delgado, 1995). CRT is also a theoretical approach that allows for the exploration of other types of subjugation based on other categories of difference like gender, class, ability, sexual orientation, and religion (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Lynn, 1999, Solórzano & Yosso; 2000). Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) introduced this

discourse to the field of education as a way to analyze the nature, form, and function of racism in the U.S. educational system; a system which they found to be as inherently destructive as the original CRT scholars found the legal system to be. Solórzano and Delgado-Bernal (2001) delineated five themes that frame CRT's application in the field of education. CRT:

1. Highlights a centrality of race and racism as well as its intersectionality with other forms of subordination;
2. Challenges the hegemony and dominant ideology that is engrained within society;
3. Possesses a commitment to social justice;
4. Highlights the centrality of experiential knowledge in developing understanding; and
5. Relies on an interdisciplinary perspective.

The use of counter-narrative is not exclusive to CRT, but the counter-narrative has become a staple of CRT's application. A counter-narrative creates space for alternative explanations that are valued and respected because it emanates directly from the experiences of the marginalized populations (Delgado, 1993). Solórzano and Yosso (2001) identify four theoretical, methodological, and pedagogical uses for counter-narratives:

1. They can build community among those at the margins of society by putting a human and familiar face to educational theory and practice;
2. They can challenge the perceived wisdom of those at society's center by providing a context to understand and transform established belief systems;
3. They can open new windows into the reality of those at the margins of society by showing the possibilities beyond the ones they live and demonstrating that they are not alone in their position; and
4. They can teach others that by combining elements of the story (narrative) and the current reality, one can construct another world that is richer than either the story or the reality alone. (p. 475)

Critical Social Theory and the Development of a Language of Critique and Transcendence

Critical Social Theory (CST) "is a multidisciplinary knowledge base with the implicit goal of advancing the emancipatory function of knowledge" (Leonardo, 2004, p. 11). CST weds Critical Theory and a broader theoretical framework which includes elements of sociological theory, cultural theory, and race and ethnic theory, and includes theorists like Calhoun (1995), Collins (2000), and Morrow and Torres (1995). In the field of education, Freire is seen as one of the fathers of CST

as he worked towards the spiritual growth of students in the face of oppressive and debilitating social, political, and economic regimes (Leonardo, 2004).

There has been a recent resurgence in CST-perspective research, which has led to the reformulation of thought regarding the use and application of CST in a multitude of areas, including education. Across disciplines, Agger (2006) found that there are seven tenets of Critical Social Theory. CST:

1. Opposes positivism;
2. Recognizes domination and subordination, but can envision a future free of such;
3. Purports that domination is structural and systemic;
4. Believes that the structures are reproduced through people's false consciousness;
5. Focuses on lived culture;
6. Believes the bridge between domination and agency is dialectal; and
7. Opposes the notion that liberation can only be traversed through the sacrifice of lives and time.

CST in education exposes and develops a language of critique, which exposes the contradictions of social life. CST also foregrounds the role criticism plays in the development of an education where students can deconstruct oppressive regimes and then reconstruct knowledge in the interest of emancipation (Leonardo, 2004).

The Blueprint for The C³ Project

The C³ Project began under the original title of Critical Hip Hop Cultural Circle, using Freire's (2002) original name, but the name was changed at the end after one of the participants suggested that we incorporate the concept of the "Cypher" into the name. Historically the cypher was the place within Hip Hop culture where emcees would get together in a circle and initiate a "freestyle" construction of rhymes. What we have achieved in this project is a freestyle construction of knowledge about the culture that is lived and loved.

The C³ Project was organized around the procedural goals of clarifying concepts, developing learning units, and analyzing those learning units. I refer to these three goals as the loci of organization. This organizational framework allowed me in my analysis to keep the chronological integrity of The C³ Project intact, as respect is given to the actual process and evolution that the participants were involved in. As the participants became more familiar with the process, they began to embrace the process integrating the concepts into their evolving identities.

In The C³ Project, I took on the role of participant observer/researcher while an English teacher from Westside High School² in Southern California served as the coordinator of the Cypher sessions. Continuing to use the Freireian terminol-

2. Pseudonym used.

ogy, the students were referred to as group participants. Lectures were replaced with the democratic dialogic method (a more humanizing approach to classroom dialogue), and units of study were called learning units. The vocabulary changes might just seem a play on semantics, but the changes went a long way to redefining a space for the participants to authentically engage with each other and with the learning units without the baggage of mainstream academic school culture. The C³ Project took place on campus in two different classrooms. I originally thought that the classroom environment would force the participants to adhere to the rules that govern student behavior, but the participants were able to quickly move past their physical environment and adapt to their new roles as participants.

I began the first session of The C³ Project by asking the participants the question, “What is Hip Hop?” In the second session, I asked the participants, “What are some problems with Hip Hop?” The dialogues which stemmed from their various answers were then used as the basis for the generative themes of the learning units (participant generated units of study), which would be the foundations for all future Cypher sessions. Once the learning units were formed, they were explored by the participants to either clarify their understandings/constructions or to seek actions resulting from the clarifications/constructions. In this sense, the Cypher served as an arena in which culture was discussed as “a systematic acquisition of [valued] knowledge, and also the democratization of culture within the general context of fundamental democratization” (Freire, 2002, p. 81). In other words, this Critical Cultural Cypher became a place where the participants actively constructed knowledge that was valued by the participants and the coordinators of the circle.

The C³ Project Participants

Because the selection of the participants would be a key factor, a purposeful sampling technique was used (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The participants for this project were selected using what Patton (1990) refers to as snowball, or chain sampling, where the researcher identifies people of interest. Those people lead the researcher to others and the chain grows. In this study, I began my search for participants by connecting with the president of the Hip Hop Club on the school’s campus. Once I found one participant, I then consulted with that participant and with the president of the club and was able to identify subsequent participants.

The first filter I used was gender; because of the scarcity, but significance of women in the history of Hip Hop culture (Rose, 1994), I thought it would be important to strive for a gender balance. The second filter I used was racial demographics. Hip Hop has moved beyond its roots in the African American and Latino communities and has sprouted up in suburbs all around the world. Understanding the evolution of Hip Hop culture, I wanted a sample of youth that would reflect the growth of the Hip Hop community and at the same time, stay true to its roots and origins. By including a representative of each of the Non-African-American

and Latino demographics represented on Westside High School's campus (White, Asian-American, and Middle Eastern) and filling the rest of the slots with African American and Latino students, I would again achieve the diversity that I was looking for, which could match the range in demographics of Hip Hop culture. Of the eight participants, one identified as White (Daisy), one as Asian-American (Brian), one as Middle Eastern (Nasa), three as African-American (C.J., Destiny, and Mike), one as Mexican (Cyrus), and one as Chicana (Mia).³

After conducting formal and informal interviews with all of the participants, a few general themes emerged that will allow for the formation of a short introduction. Analyzing the codes, I found that the issues that most occupied the participants' time, energy, and mental processes were school and problems with school. This was not unexpected, as many of my questions in the formalized interviews had to do with school and how they viewed school; but it did show that their lives outside of mainstream academic settings were often seen as secondary to both the social and academic worlds that education provided. Another main focus for the participants was their families and the values that were passed down to them from the family unit. Looking back on the interviews, I have to point out that not all of the discussions about the family unit were positive: Two of the participants were molested by family members; seven of the eight participants came from single-parent households, which caused stress in their lives; half of the participants had either little or no contact with the parent that was out of their lives, either by choice or by circumstance. Overall, the participants' family lives were tumultuous, but all were persevering through the difficulty.

Interestingly, race and class were some of the most frequently discussed topics in the early interviews and observations. Race and racial analyses frequently found their ways into the mainstream academic classrooms, while class was discussed primarily in the interviews in terms of where the participants grew up. Criminality and violence frequently came up as the participants recollected growing up: Two of the participants were either stabbed or shot; one participant's father was in jail for a significant period; and another participant's father was part of the Mafia and had been deported. While the students' stories reveal much hardship and pain, they also reveal life. Many of these students—though not all—have found their passion for life through Hip Hop. It has played an important role in each of their lives. For some, Hip Hop was life-saving. For others, Hip Hop was and continues to be life-nourishing.

Overall, I do not think these participants had a disproportionate cache of interesting stories—not in the least. Given the opportunity, all students can demonstrate that their lives are filled with meaning, the expression of which could be used as a platform in the education of others. These participants had the opportunity to share their stories, but there are hundreds of students that are literally dying every day, trying to be heard.

3. I have used designations that were in accordance with how the students self-reported.

The Cypher Sessions

The Cyphers were a series of Freireian intergroup dialogues that interrogated Hip Hop culture through a critical lens. Schoem and Hurtado (2001) argue that intergroup dialogue, from a Freireian perspective, can be used as a tool to problematize existing social relations and help move us toward a more democratic society. It creates a liberatory space where students can question the nature of social reality and construct their own. This was a defining feature of the Cyphers.

The Clarification of Concepts: What is Hip Hop?

The first session began with the question, “What is Hip Hop?” The participants had all answered this question individually in their introductory interviews, but as their different definitions came together, a dynamic of The Cypher began to take shape. In the early sessions, the participants were called upon to clarify and defend their personal constructions of Hip Hop as they challenged and considered other participants’ constructions. At the end of the first session, the group was asked to work together to generate a group construction of Hip Hop that accounted for everyone’s stated opinions.

As the participants began to share their own personal constructions of Hip Hop, they began to see that their own definitions were somewhat similar, but also distinctly different in a few fundamental areas. The first challenge the group faced was when one participant challenged a specific detail of another participant’s construction of Hip Hop, specifically the statement that Hip Hop can be the way you dress. The belief that someone could “put on a hat backwards and say that they are Hip Hop” was a problem that needed to be addressed in greater depth. The ensuing conversation helped the participants open the dialogue to a deeper consideration of whether or not people’s choices *could* represent their cultural affiliation. The ability to choose one’s affiliation is a powerful subject to tackle and within ten minutes of the first session, we were already addressing the dilemma of subject vs. object. As mentioned previously, a subject is someone who “has the capacity to adapt oneself to reality *plus* the critical capacity to make choices and transform [their] reality” (Freire, 2002, p. 4). This is in opposition to an object, who is subjected to the choices of others and is forced to adapt to prearranged circumstances.

The group decided that choices could represent their cultural affiliation, but only when taking all of their choices into account; for example, a choice to dress a certain way could represent a person’s choice of cultural affiliation, but the choice to dress a certain way as a stand-alone determinant would not be accurate. This explanation about choice allowed the group to theoretically exclude someone from Hip Hop if their only connection to Hip Hop was their style of dress, but someone in Hip Hop could dress a certain way and that would be a valid expression of their cultural affiliation.

The group used this discussion about the choices that one makes to critique their own constructions. The idea that a person can make choices that represent their cultural affiliations was questioned as the participants wrestled with the idea that a person has the freedom to be contradictory and complicated in a society (and a school system) that tries to define, label, and categorize people. One of the participants shared the statement:

Pac [Tupac Shakur] was the most contradictory rapper ever and he was one of the greatest [and] that's more than ok. Everybody has different sides. I'm one of the most coolest guys you have ever meet but if you bring me to that point, I can get evil...As hard as you try, can you tell me one person that you do know that is not a hypocrite. I try my hardest to not to ...everybody is a hypocrite, everybody's got their different sides.

Along the lines of Dubois's dual consciousness, Baudrillard's (1993) multiplicity and Freire's (2002) critical consciousness, this statement was promoting the merits of multiple ways of being and its necessity in Hip Hop culture. This post-modernist approach to identity becomes fundamental to Hip Hop culture (Potter, 1995) and the ways in which Hip Hop sees and defines itself. Hip Hop reserves the right to change itself at any time.

The group then refocused on the question, "What is Hip Hop?" in an attempt to come up with an answer that was palatable to every member in the group. The result was strikingly different from the beginning of the session, as the following exchange illustrates:

Destiny: You could just say life. Rapping is your life. Culture is your life. So when all is said and done, it's life.

A.De: So Hip Hop is life...

Destiny: It's your way of life, your lifestyle. It's who you are.

A.De: Is this ok with everybody?

Everyone: Yep.

This analysis and subsequent encapsulation took into account all of the participants' constructions and they found that by defining Hip Hop together, their new definition became more applicable to greater numbers of people. Early on, the group was already developing its own counter-narratives. Through their own lived experiences, the group members established a construction of Hip Hop that met the four theoretical and methodological uses for counter narratives established by Solórzano and Yosso (2002). The participants were able to:

1. Build community by establishing their own social theories that in this process would be valued and respected;
2. Provide a context to understand and transform established belief systems;
3. Open new windows into their reality; and

4. Teach themselves that by combining their stories, they could together construct an alternative understanding of Hip Hop that was richer than their personal stories alone.

The Development of the Learning Units

Just as Freire's participants in his Cultural Circles established their own learning units, this group too began engaging in a dialogue that would result in the development of the learning units of interest. In the planning of the Cypher, I wanted to pose the question to the participants, "What problems do you see in Hip Hop today?" This would be the last formal question that I would ask of the participants. Their answers would dictate the direction of the Cypher sessions.

One of the loci of interest was the development of a language of critique and transcendence and in this section, we see the participants begin to utilize this tool, while transforming the ways in which they discussed Hip Hop. The participants began to analyze the causes of Hip Hop's problems rather than just identifying them. As they analyzed problems, they saw that the problems they were identifying (marketing, sales, and promotion) were systemic issues more than they were problems with the actual culture of Hip Hop in general. This added a degree of complexity that the participants might not have considered before the Cypher sessions. For example, when talking about the issue of misogyny, Destiny was quick to analyze the problem as capitalist exploitation by the record companies:

[The record companies] put females out there cause and that's what the media sees. If [women] are out there hoeing around in the music video, their part [in the video] would be giving a boy pleasure. Young boys are going to look at that like "Oh 50 Cent has hoes" and so they start labeling us females as hoes. The young boys are going to have that 50 [Cent] mentality like they can get anything they want, but what they have to realize is the reason why [50 Cent] has these hoes [in his video] is because [the record companies] are trying to make money like he is by him putting the record out there.

CST sees a language of transcendence as necessary because it assumes the possibility of a less oppressive condition. The participants here were able to begin the process of constructing alternative realities as they started to move from the fatalistic place of "This is the way that Hip Hop is" to the position of empowerment of "This is what can be done to change the direction of Hip Hop culture." Criticism and systemic critique were being used as tools to open up the problematization of Hip Hop culture to the multiple perspectives represented by the participants. Through these discussions, the participants were making meaning for themselves.

The dialogue was centered on whether systemic influences were Hip Hop's problem, or if the systemic influences were a problem beyond Hip Hop culture. The group began to consider the systemic impact of societal influence outside of Hip Hop culture, which included defending Hip Hop from its detractors. The

groups' defense of Hip Hop led many in the group to search for systemic influences that have shaped the current image of Hip Hop. To the participants, the amount of control individuals had in the everyday functioning of Hip Hop culture was minimal. Hip Hop, in participants' eyes, was a scapegoat for society's ills and it was being used by critics to promote their own agendas. When pushed to identify the specific identities of the outside influences, the group looked at record labels and the consumers of Hip Hop culture as the culprits. The lack of control over one's chosen culture is reminiscent of Freire's argument in the subject-versus-object continuum. Here, Hip Hop is the object that is being acted upon by outside sources (e.g., consumers' buying habits and record companies catering to these habits), while Hip Hop as a subject would see Hip Hop securing the capacity to make its own choices and transform its own image.

The participants continued to discuss the depths of their beliefs about the problems in Hip Hop over the course of two sessions. Using consensus, they narrowed and original list of fifteen problems into three problems that would become the foundation of our learning units:

1. Negativity in Hip Hop (violence, misogyny, drugs, greed⁴);
2. Reality in Hip Hop (keeping it real); and
3. Abuse of Hip Hop as a system of control.

This list became the foundation of the learning units that we would explore in the upcoming sessions, but the list itself provides some major clues to the effectiveness of The C³ Project. The participants began to see Hip Hop as suffering from a wave of negativity that wasn't always there. They talked about the role of women in Hip Hop, the violence that had cost some of its major figures their lives, the impact the drug abuse was having on the kids, and the rampant materialism that was capturing the media by storm. These were negative things in the minds of the participants, but they also took a critical look and they found that most of problems in Hip Hop were media driven. Through the participants' discussions about the systemic influences in Hip Hop, they found that there was little consistency between the artists inside the recording studios and outside the studios. New media, including digital, computerized, and internet sources, has enabled unprecedented access into the lives of celebrities and the participants have found that the words that come from the artists (especially their comments regarding how much money they have) were strikingly different from how the artists were living their lives (most artists do not make a great deal of money from the sales of their music), which the participants found to be disconcerting. Topic Number 2 in the participants' list was a result of this analysis and the mantra "Keep it real" was not only a problem, but a solution as well. The third problem in Hip Hop also resulted from a systematic analysis. The participants felt that those in charge

4. Greed was later substituted in the last session for the problem of "Influence as a form of social control" due to requests by the participants to focus on this topic.

of the disbursement of Hip Hop in mainstream American culture understood the influence they had over the youth of today, but were acting in the best interests of Capitalism, rather than in the best interests of Hip Hop as a culture.

I again return to the developing systemic critique and the language of critique and transcendence that the participants were engaged in. The mantra “Keep it real” was put forth as a way that Hip Hop could overcome some of the negativity in Hip Hop culture. The participants would soon find that their journeys had just begun.

The Learning Unit Freestyles

As a group, we found that we only had a total of four sessions left to discuss our three topics of analysis and we saw that, given the constraints of the time, we had to find an alternative way of framing the dialogues. As a result, the group decided to focus the sessions on the four different aspects associated with Negativity in Hip Hop—violence, misogyny, drugs, and influence—because it was the feeling of the group that the other identified problems (reality in Hip Hop, and abuse of Hip Hop as a system of control) would be discussed and cross referenced in the discussions. In this section, I will take an in-depth look at the discussions of violence and misogyny. In addition, I will continue to point out examples of each of the loci of impact: development of a language of critique and transcendence, formation of counter-narratives, and the development of *consientização* (when applicable). I will also demonstrate how the procedural goals of the project were maintained (or not) as we entered into a dialogue about the individual topics.

Violence (Participants in Attendance: C.J., Daisy, Mia, and Mike)

In keeping with the procedural goals of the project, the first order of business was clarifying the concept of violence. Daisy defined violence as “intentional harm inflicted on someone for a reason.” All of the participants agreed, but were quick to point out the different types of violence—physical, verbal, mental, and emotional. The group then decided to focus on physical violence for the purposes of the discussion. The group then began by their dialogue about violence by identifying “beef” as one of the major sources of the violence associated with Hip Hop culture. Beef is a term in Hip Hop culture that refers to conflict, either between two artists, or two groups of artists. In their analysis, the participants differentiated between real beef (beef that is genuine and has the potential to escalate into lethal violence) and manufactured beef (beef that is used to promote an album, generate publicity and increase sales for an upcoming album; an increasingly frequent strategy). The group as a whole was very suspicious of how Hip Hop has been portrayed in the media and their critique is supported by evidence they have gathered through their own experiences. The students mentioned specific “beefs” that, upon closer reflection, were constructed by record companies as promotional tools. They began by looking at the current beef between artists Jay-Z and Cam’ron. This beef

was deemed to have a shred of credibility due to a recent incident where Cam'ron was in Washington D.C. for Howard University's Homecoming and he and his car were shot in a drive-by shooting. Reports said that the shooters drove off shouting a Jay-Z reference and holding up a hand signal associated with Roc-A-Fella (Jay-Z's record label). Some in the group were skeptical of the legitimacy of this beef, as Cam'ron had an album that was to be released in the upcoming weeks:

Ms. Stevenson: Does that go back to what you were talking about before when you were talking about the various aspects of rap that sell?

Daisy: Yea it does sell, and like I was saying before that, like Tony also said, that people always drop a track for a reason, but it seems like beef tracks drop right before albums do.

Mike: To spark sales.

Daisy: It's like 'let me hear his album and if he's gonna come hard on Hot 97 [a radio station in New York City] talking up Jay-Z, let me go get that Cam'ron album to see if all the rest of it's true.

As the participants continued to debate the veracity of specific beefs in Hip Hop, I asked the question, "How does this move into violence?" in an attempt to move the conversation from the specific to the theoretical. As the participants began to look for root causes of violence, Ms. Stevenson challenged the group by pointing out this problem with their construction of violence as being popular in Hip Hop culture. Her argument was that violence was more of a human infatuation, rather than it being isolated within Hip Hop culture. By pointing this out, Ms. Stevenson forced the participants to take a deeper look at the systemic functioning of violence within Hip Hop. This also allowed the group to theorize about violence in Hip Hop culture at a systemic level, which started with an analysis of the violence that led to the deaths of both Tupac Shakur and Christopher "Notorious B.I.G." Wallace. The participants looked at the roles of the record companies and the artists:

Daisy: And I think it was also because the beef got so exploited that [it became west] coast against [east] coast... I mean Biggie [and] Pac were fighting for a coast and that's a lot of pressure for the first person to back down. There is a point where somebody has to be a man in this situation, but you know that was before. It was too late for somebody to do that.

Ms. Stevenson: So it's like it requires them to act a certain way. And they're left with no other alternatives but to stay that way, like you said they felt trapped so do. You think that's it as an industry that traps you or requires you to be something that you don't want to be?

Daisy: Of course, like Mike said I think we should look at Suge [Knight, CEO of Death Row Entertainment] and him feeding him [Shakur] these things... I think that the industry has a lot to do with it, you know. They

are making money [but] the rappers are the ones who carry most of the burden. They are the ones that people are looking down on; people are saying [they are] too violent. And at the same time the industry is the ones roping it.

Ms. Stevenson: I mean like if I'm working for Capital or whatever, Capital is making money off of me but I'm the one who's on the line depending on what goes down.

Mike: They putting it in the artist head like she said like these top, top labels not just the Death Row but the people over Death Row: Interscope, Universal where ever is up there those people are like feeding these beefs on their not saying 'Pac don't make another diss to Biggie' cause its not good for your career; its great for his sales, you know.

Ms. Stevenson: So what does that mean?

Daisy: The cycle of violence.

Mike: The next Biggie the next Pac.

The concept of artists being trapped into personas that the artist creates and that the label supports is one which the participants began to see as an unbalanced endeavor, where the artist is the one who shoulders all the risks, and if things go wrong, the label will be unaffected. Violence for the sake of financial gain becomes a risk that only a few can win and invariably ends poorly for the artist, and in the worst case scenario, the artist loses his or her life. The participants began to put words to, as Daisy said, "the cycle of violence" and by considering the systemic implications, the participants began to actively seek ways that this cycle manifests itself in other areas in their lives.

This interrogation forced the participants to consider worlds outside their own and also allowed them to re-construct elements in their own world (Hip Hop culture) with newly considered information. It was instances like this that showed how the students were encouraged to sharpen their critical and analytical skills as they were prompted to consider the depth of the problems. Because of the dialogic format of the Cyphers, this analysis resulted in the further development of their use of language to critique.

A main feature of The C³ Project was to have the participants not only theoretically construct their culture, but also to develop actions through which the participants could engage with their culture. This is the essence of Freire's (2003) concept of praxis, which again is reflection combined with action upon the world in an effort to transform it. These actions serve to help the participants see themselves as participants acting within and on behalf of a culture, instead of seeing the culture as a stagnant construct too big for any one individual to affect. Ms. Stevenson then pushed the participants towards the construction of an individual action; in this case, an action that could help the participant to disrupt their identified cycle of violence within their culture.

This line of questioning proved to be a difficult challenge for the participants to fully embrace. The concept of seeing themselves as having the power to individually (or as an individual group) influence a whole culture was challenging. Freire (2002) himself talked about the difficulty in moving people to consider themselves as agents of change and that people would often get stuck in the development of their consciousness because they feared that the world was too big to change. In the Cyphers, the participants would consistently return to the difficulties associated with the influence of a culture, rather than seeing ways in which individual action could begin the process of change. The line of questioning evolved and the participants slowly thought of things that they could do and considered the impact that their actions would have on the culture:

Mike: Well I guess personally I can't go out and change everybody's mind, but it could be one of my goals or one of my many goals that I can pursue as a rapper. If it comes about [the opportunity to change someone's opinion] then I'm going to take that opportunity. If I get the opportunity to do something with music then, yes I'll go out and put a party record out there to get known or whatever, but then personally I think it comes up to artist to change. I feel if I made it, then I would take that chance and try to throw that message out there.

Daisy: I mean and I want to be in the industry so that these people can have a choice to put bullshit out and yea millions of dollars would be great but if I can put out a message I'm going to make last a lifetime then whatever.

The participants were considering their role in changing culture, but that role was still considered hypothetical: "If I made it..." and "When I get that big..." This was a step towards the consideration of individual actions. The participants were very tentative about committing to these actions, so they created hypothetical stories about what they would do in the future. Upon closer inspection, even their hypothetical stories were tentative. The participants needed to begin to see how they were presently affecting change. On the other hand, the participants were developing their own counter-narratives in relation to the problem of violence in Hip Hop culture. Their stories about the future were stories from their own (albeit hypothetical) experiences that were counter to stories that dominated the mainstream media, but still they were struggling to render their reflections into immediate action.

Finally, as the session was wrapping up, Mia brought forth an example from her life as an artist that really spoke to the roots of the praxis that The C³ Project was built upon. Mia's example was about taking responsibility for her own feelings and not using other people as an excuse for her own violent feelings. I, as a facilitator, rephrased her statement in a way that the participants could see that this was indeed an individual action that could have a lasting impact on all of

Hip Hop culture if they as a group were to proselytize this new philosophy to the masses:

Mia: Like if I had my CD and I had like a song on there I might write about it, it's not like I did the whole piece or the name you wouldn't even know who I was talking about I don't put no names no relations to it and you can get the feeling about the way I say it cause I know how to use my words, you know what I'm talking about, you know how I feel by the way I'm expressing myself I'm not trying to put no names

A.De: Hold on, you bring up a great point, taking ownership of your own feelings rather than putting your violence onto somebody else. You're saying these are my feelings I own them, this is what it's about, it don't matter who I'm talking about, but this is what I'm saying and I'm saying it.

This was a revelation for the participants and for the project. This was something that Mia was doing now and something that the other participants could actively integrate into their lives. The participants began to actively consider the concept of praxis—reflection combined with action upon the world in an effort to transform it. This was the first sign of the development of *consientização*. The participants began to gain an appreciation for the process and they began to see how this program was designed to work. Many teachers ask students how to make the world a better place, but for these participants, this was now becoming tangible.

The next step—and often the more difficult one—was to get the participants to consider how they would implement these actions into their everyday experiences. The depth of analysis and the outcomes that the group worked through helped to fuel the remaining sessions. The participants were energized to see the full power of these sessions, from the reconstruction of their definition to the creation of actions related to the problems identified in their lived culture.

Misogyny (Participants in Attendance: Brian, C.J., Daisy, Destiny, Mia, and Mike)

In this session, the participants were working towards gaining an understanding of and a solution for the problem of misogyny in Hip Hop culture. This was an important topic, particularly for the some of the female participants in the group. Destiny and Mia spoke individually about the role of women in Hip Hop culture and the ways in which women were portrayed. Destiny's issues came from the use of women as a material obsession: "Hip Hop is about the money the girls, the clothes, the cars, you know, every other word rhyming, and a girl shaking her booty." Mia's issues were more centered on women being "the ultimate prize in Hip Hop" culture:

Hip Hop promotes the drive for money. You must have money to get the women. Here's how it goes: You need to be good at something to get the money, to get the cars, and the things that women want. They get the woman to get more women.

Many of the males in the group did not mention the role of women in Hip Hop as a problem, so this Cypher was going to be an important introduction to a feminist perspective in Hip Hop for them.

The Cypher again began with Ms. Stevenson asking the participants to clarify their construction of misogyny. This was another example of the procedural functioning of the sessions as she outlined the need for the group to work together towards a common understanding. The group decided that misogyny as the exploitation of women with a special interest in women being commodified:

Ms. Stevenson: So what is your group definition of misogyny when you put it out there?

Daisy: It's like an exploitation of women.

Ms. Stevenson: Is that the group definition exploitation of women?

Daisy: Oh God lord, that's what I think it is.

Ms. Stevenson: You guys need to form this as a community.

A.De: Brian, you talked about possessing women—that was one of the lines that you said...

Brian: Like I just felt like Hip Hop makes it seem like women are like property or something. It's something you don't really treat it with respect.

Once this basic understanding was established by the group, Ms. Stevenson worked to establish the roles of both men and women in the perpetuation of misogyny. This was done to move the group towards a systemic understanding of misogyny, rather than misogyny as an individual belief system. In the restating of the group's definition of how misogyny is perpetrated in Hip Hop, I said, "Misogyny is the exploitation of women, women as property, and women as sex objects and that misogyny is perpetrated by women as well as men. Women are doing it just as much as men are doing it." Mia took umbrage with my last statement and added that, "Well, there are not that many women to do it." Mia's statement was an important one, as women in Hip Hop are rarely in positions of power or in positions to make decisions. This would separate the misogyny towards women by women because of the power dynamic. In an unequal society, those in power are more culpable for the distresses, because they are the ones making the decisions to maintain the oppressive power structures. The participants spoke about women being forced into positions where they degrade themselves or other women because of the males behind the scenes making the decisions.

The next step in the session was to attempt to address the problem in a way that can and will affect change in the culture. Again, the participants struggled to find a way for an individual to change an entire culture, on a systemic level; they had struggled in the same way during the session on violence. Initially, the

participants focused their critique on the parental responsibilities of raising young women (i.e., making young women aware of how the system works and changing their behavior accordingly), which did nothing to address the problem itself. Eventually though, Mike made connections between systemic influences and his own behavior:

Mike: I think video and music has influenced me by the way I look at females because when you look at it, it's like society gives you these stereotypes of what's a pretty girl, an attractive girl, and what you like in a girl. It [the media] kind of raises you along with your family and how you were brought up and stuff, but I can't blame it on Hip Hop because the fact of Hip Hop is a part of society. I define Hip Hop as life and Hip Hop has that part of life in it and I think that, yes, it has [conditioned] me and I think we came here today to think of ways how to resolve it. Last week's answer was like you have to be real with yourself. When it comes to these problems in Hip Hop, especially misogyny; if you really feel you have to have fifty girls in your house, then do that. But if you know for a fact that that's not you, even if you make fun music, you're just doing it to make music, then don't do it. [The media] has it probably has changed my view or influenced my view on females because that's how I grew up in Hip Hop. That's what I see in Hip Hop. When I look at videos I see these so called, what they say is attractive and that's what I look at when I look for females.

A.De: So knowing that you have gone through this, now that you have seen this, now does this change the way that you are going to look at women?

Mike: No...

All: [Laughter]

Mike: ...I mean I would love to sit here and say I'm going to go after a church woman, but I'm not. I don't look at females in a disrespectful way, but that's what society... eighteen years of me growing up like that. I think you have your own inner views by the way you look at people but most of the time I think it's what society made it look.

After the session, I asked Mike if he had ever considered this line of thinking before and he told me "not until now." This dialogue raised a consciousness about his relationships with women and the power of the media to influence his thoughts. Building off the last Cypher, where the concepts of praxis and conscientização were realized, Mike brought the group back to the theme of the sessions, which was a systemic analysis of behavior and cause combined with action. The theme of "being real with yourself" came up as an action in response to the misogyny in Hip Hop culture. His honest analysis of the effect that the media has had on his choices was profound; just as profound was his honesty concerning his future. His statement that he will probably not change because of a new construction of misogyny

might not be what the sessions were designed for, but it is a great start and with any luck, Mike will continue to see the problems and make changes in his life accordingly.

As this session wrapped up, the participants again had to reassure themselves that change was possible. As they spoke amongst themselves, they reflected on both past Cyphers and the origins of Hip Hop itself. Hip Hop began as a protest; a crying out against the problems facing a community. Hip Hop was a solution to a problem that began with a small group of people and this fact, thankfully, did not escape this group:

A.De: So how do we get to the point to where how do we make ourselves aware that the difficult road is worth traveling? Are we changing society if we change ourselves?

Daisy: That's a personal decision. I feel like if we change ourselves, fuck society, 'cause you're doing the right thing. Hopefully you associate yourself with people who do similarly the right things...I feel like if we change ourselves and we make a sincere effort to make it known that were not that kind of person and we don't condone that kind of lifestyle, you're changing yourself and you can pass that on to your kid you know what I'm saying?

A.De: So, are you not changing society like that?

Daisy: Yea it is cause because it maybe five people and my friends may have the same mentality as me and it may be ten people. That's better than nobody. So people don't think that one person can make a difference, but you don't realize that the people around you are merely a reflection of yourself. You can influence them in some way, not completely, but in a way. Then you can pass it on to your kids and then their lifestyle and then generations of people thinking that this isn't right.

Mia: Hip Hop came as a change right? Change does hurt and it does happen like you can even say in a short distance. As far as music goes, it does change. As far as this sex thing, sex sells; it's here, but it's changing. It's changed from the past. I'm petty sure it's going to change. It might be there, but if you look, women are dressing more classy now. It's like a phase. Also women know it still sells, so we can always refer back to it.

Daisy began by considering how individuals can impact society, which was a fundamental point in The C³ Project. The participants were having such a hard time considering the impact one individual or one group of individuals could have on Hip Hop culture, but by the end of this session, they started to understand the concept of transcendence. Mia then continued by making a historical connection, harkening back to the origins of Hip Hop culture as a culture of resistance. As a

group, the participants began to see a way out of the current situation and the possibility of a future without misogyny as a dominant theme in Hip Hop culture.

Drugs and Influence

Through my analysis of the sessions, I realized that I had made a change in the format of the sessions in the last two learning unit freestyles on drugs and influence. In these sessions, I introduced music that directly dealt with these topics., which I thought was a small adjustment that would help to maintain the participants' interest. The participants did respond with an increased passion, as was evidenced by their approval of the music in the Cyphers. However, because I made this shift, I sacrificed a big part of the program's integrity: it shifted the sessions' focus away from a critique of the identified problem in Hip Hop and to a critique of the music that discussed the problem in Hip Hop. The result was that the participants, while still developing counter-narratives and a language of critique, failed to address the charge of creating actions that the participants could use to challenge the problem being addressed. After all, when discussing the music of specific artists, the focus shifts from the participants taking responsibility for their actions to change the systemic problems in Hip Hop, to the will and responsibility of various artists.

Bringing the music and the lyrics into the sessions did allow the students to bring in analytical skills typically reserved for English classes. As they began deconstructing the poetry, their analysis became more of an academic exercise, but they were passionately engaged with the material. The approach deepened the participants' thinking and facilitated their development of a language of critique, and enabled them to use the skills from "mainstream academia" to deconstruct their lived culture. It also allowed them to develop their own counter-narratives because they were able to bring an analysis of their lived experiences to their interpretations.

The C³ Project as a Discourse of Enlightenment

In this section, I will show how the participants constructed a discourse of enlightenment, where they assumed the responsibility to act upon Hip Hop culture and not just be passively receive that culture. By deconstructing the power dynamics within Hip Hop culture, they were able to identify the problems that actually transcend Hip Hop culture. These problems were then addressed through the formulation of actions that the participants could enact in their lives as they began to engage others in a dialogue of enlightenment inside of and outside of Hip Hop culture.

To demonstrate the impact of The C³ Project on the participants, I begin with a passage from Freire (2003) adapted to fit this project. These passages demonstrate the relationship the participants (and many youth have) with Hip Hop culture:

This relationship involves a Narrating Subject [the media] and patient, listening objects [youth]. The contents, whether values or empirical dimensions of reality, tend in the process of being narrated to become lifeless and petrified. [Hip Hop] is suffering from narration sickness. The [media] talks about [Hip Hop] as if it were motionless, static, compartmentalized, and predictable. Or else it expounds on a topic completely alien to the existential experiences of the [youth]. [Its] task is to “fill” the [youth] with the contents of [its] narration – contents which are detached from reality, disconnected from the reality that engendered them and could give them significance. Words are emptied of the concreteness and become a hollow, alienated, and alienating verbosity. (Freire, 2003, p. 71)

Re-reading this, I was struck by the accuracy of these passages, as it demonstrated the relationship many had with Hip Hop culture today. In the Cypher sessions, we critically examined the structures of domination and subordination inherent to Hip Hop and we found that the media’s representation of Hip Hop is static, compartmentalized, and predictable. Because they were tired of the story that was being told and retold, they developed their counter-narratives about Hip Hop.

The participants began with a scathing critique of the media. Their story told that media, while bringing Hip Hop to the masses, was not to be trusted. “It’s like giving in to the media” Destiny says in response to people believing the stories that are consistently conjured up. C.J. described how groups of people become compartmentalized: “You know how you got the media or typical white America always talking about how black people are always drugged up.” Mike said, “The stereotypes are what the media and record labels run to,” as he described how predictable the media is in its showcasing of the negative aspects of Hip Hop culture.

The participants were then able to, through a humanizing dialogue, develop their own counter-narratives about what Hip Hop was and what it wasn’t, and most importantly, identify Hip Hop’s problems for themselves:

1. Hip Hop has a problem with negativity (violence, misogyny, drugs and greed);
2. Hip Hop is not “keeping it real”; and
3. Hip Hop is being used as a system of control. This process can be reworked by taking the control from those who market Hip Hop and putting it back in the hands of the people who live it.

Finally, once the problems were identified, the participants found ways to individually take actions to solve them. Mia found through her own writing that one way to address violence in Hip Hop was for individuals to take responsibility for their own feelings. She wasn’t going to place any blame on anyone else for the pain that she felt because the pain was hers and no one else’s. This was her individual action. When addressing the problem of misogyny, Daisy said, “If you want to change society, you have to change yourself first because you can’t expect

to change people when you're following the prototype of the problem in the first place." This came after Daisy had stated that she did not have a problem with how women were being portrayed in Hip Hop. Through the humanizing dialogue and her openness to other people's perspectives, she saw that misogyny might be something that she needed to consider more deeply. Mike, addressing the topic of influence, took action and told his friend, "Do you realize we are just listening and feeding in to all this right here?" He, in the words of Ms. Stevenson, was "exposing [his] friends to a different kind of music and giving them a different appreciation." In Freirian terminology, this is an example of performed praxis and activated *consientização*.

Within the Cypher sessions and in the interviews, the participants used a language of critique and transcendence to develop their own counter-narratives to formulate actions, which resulted in the awakening of critical awareness or *consientização*. Borrowing another passage from Freire (2003), Hip Hop—no longer something to be described with deceptive words—became the object of that transforming action by (young) men and (young) women, which resulted in their humanization.

Conclusion

The Critical Cultural Cypher can be used as a tool to help educators engage students in a dialogue about a their understanding of Hip Hop culture, and help the students begin to see the world as a malleable and complex system, rather than seeing it as rigid and simplistic. Hip Hop (or any other cultural affiliation) can be called upon to help students address systemic and structural domination by providing a site where a student can take advantage of skills like counter-narratives and a language of critique and transcendence to help them describe and act upon an ever changing world. As students become subjects involved in the construction of their world, they can use those same skills to analyze how they fit into and how they can then shape other cultures (i.e., mainstream academic culture). The C³ Project can have a powerful impact on students' development of *consientização* (the awakening of critical awareness), which can lead to in-depth investigations. The participants in The C³ Project looked within within Hip Hop culture, where they found a culture wrought with controversy and problems, but by looking within themselves, they were able to work toward developing solutions.

Building on the work of Morrell (2004a; 2004b) and Morrell and Duncan-Andrade (2002), who used Hip Hop music to build a scaffold between the official mainstream academic curriculum (i.e., canonical texts) and the students' lived culture, The C³ Project works to re-write the curriculum. Cuban (1993) points out that many educational reforms have failed due to a refusal to recognize the multiplicity of curricula and the power of pedagogical influence in educating students. While The C³ Project's discourse of enlightenment would definitely be considered non-standard curricula, the pedagogy can be recognized through Moll's funds

of knowledge (Moll, Amanti, Neff & Gonzalez, 1992), wherein the students' strengths are incorporated into the teacher's pedagogy. The development of educational reform must be done at both the curricular and pedagogical levels, and research of this ilk needs to be valued and continued if researchers are truly going to have an impact in classrooms. Early in this piece, I called for the integration of a culturally congruent curriculum that acknowledges, values, and incorporates students' identities outside of schools via a critical pedagogical framework. Given the results of The C³ Project, I will end with a call for curriculum and pedagogy that incorporate the students' lived culture in which they can hone their skills of analysis in meaningful ways. Once these skills are developed, students and teachers can begin to reconstruct an educational system that is fair and just.

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