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# Tale of two cultures: Hip-hop and schooling and the impact on African American identity and academic achievement

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**A TALE OF TWO CULTURES: HIP HOP AND SCHOOLING AND THE  
IMPACT ON AFRICAN AMERICAN IDENTITY AND ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT**

by

**BARBARA S. WISNIEWSKI**

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submitted to the Graduate School

of Wayne State University,

Detroit, Michigan

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of

**DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

2011

MAJOR: EDUCATIONAL EVALUATION  
AND RESEARCH

Approved by:

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Advisor

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Date

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The academic underachievement of minority students has been well researched. Most of the studies put forward that Black children continue to under achieve compared to others on various gauges of school performance, including test scores, grade point average, retention, dropout rate, disciplinary action, and high school graduation rates (U.S. Dept. of Education, National Center for Education Statistics). Black students lead their white counterparts in suspension rates, disengagement, and placements in special education classes (Dei, 1997; Solomon, 1992). Several scholars contend that a primary reason for these circumstances is a result of the cultural rift that exists between the Black youth culture and the educational systems' Eurocentric middle class culture – a dynamic in which Black students lack the cultural capital required to flourish academically (Bourdieu, 1993; Solomon, 1992). It seems obvious that the negative stereotypes about Black teens play a role in their attitudes about schooling. Regrettably, it seems that earlier studies have not been as beneficial in abetting inner city educators in satisfactorily grasping ways to educated Black youth who are consumers of hip hop, as they might.

Nevertheless, the debate lingers on how to best educate students of color as they persist with their struggles in a Eurocentric educational system. Educational reform continues at all levels, particularly since *No Child Left Behind*, which has all too often prompted educators to “teach to the test.” Other so-called “reforms” attempt to tackle diversity through unconventional methods without confronting the causes of marginalization (Sleeter & McLaren, 1995). What's more, standardized tests have come under tremendous scrutiny as the *only* measures of school success, without bearing in mind the detachment minorities bring to the process of schooling

(Malloy & Malloy, 1998).

As a long time educator in urban schools, I have encountered the enormous challenges confronting inner city schoolteachers, above all, engaging students. Literature regarding the disengagement of Black students in American schools is swelling (Dei, 1997, 2000; Solomon, 1992; Wright, 1985). No comprehensive examination of the problem yet exists. More specifically, academic discussions of the cultural gap and disengagement of Black students in public schooling has not yet been addressed with respect to the role of popular culture in educating African American students, or the role of hip hop plays in youth culture.

As an urban school teacher, I recognize the cultural rift between Black students and public schooling and sense that it is a most noteworthy dynamic in explaining the students' lack of academic achievement. I have a sneaking suspicion that African American students maintain solid affiliations with their out-of-school culture, which continue to be an underexplored subject. Black inner city teens who struggle academically and economically, for the most part, wind up encountering other adversities, including dropping out of school, substance abuse, domestic violence, etc. I am curious as to whether or not their cultures are or have been in some way slighted by urban educators or perhaps, the public in general.

For more than a decade, hip hop has prompted strong and often negative opinions from adults of all races and socio-economic classes. A number of social scientists argue that hip hop endorses anti-social behaviors particularly within educational environments. Others describe hip hop as a mode of expression of opposition to various forms of institutionalized oppression. Many unanswered questions remain regarding rap music's relevance in the lives of young inner city and seemingly disenfranchised Black youth. What is most troubling to me is that educational dialogue, regarding hip hop, what many Black scholars (Dyson, 2004; Watkins, 2005; Rose,

1994) see as the most compelling form of Black youth culture today, is lacking from almost all discussions of African American disengagement in public schooling.

The time has come to acknowledging youth culture and hip hop's place in it as a component of experience and collaborated practice between cultures that exist in our society, In fact, popular culture is the lens through which many youth are inclined to live their lives, form their identities and experience the educational process (Giroux, 1994a; McLaren, 1999).

While hip hop culture is being marketed by a myriad of corporations to sell goods, it is projected that a majority of Americans are being influenced by hip hop culture (Kelly, 1997). Figures also suggest that a sizeable majority of Black youth are linked to hip hop (Kitwana, 2004). Yet, educators often fail to utilize pop culture as a vehicle to connect with youth and influence academic achievement. Addressing issues about Black youth identity and how modern-day culture shapes what and how students learn is critical in that educational process. Hip hop culture has already been incorporated into the educational system in extra-curricular activities and after school programs where teachers are assisting students as they construct their own music and lexis (Anderson, 2004). It has also been applied in classrooms to enhance subject matter in K-12 grade levels (Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2002). Thus, I contend that we must acknowledge hip hop culture in order to address the problem of Black youth disengagement from public schooling and include hip hop in our dialogue. If schools want to be more successful in educating African Americans, they need to give more attention to hip hop culture, acknowledging their culture in an attempt to break the vicious cycle of Black disengagement in school. For that reason, this study will acknowledge that awareness of hip hop is crucial to understanding and educating Black youth and suggest ways for academia to employ popular culture in dialogues of the schooling of African American youth.

Ultimately, in my research, I inquire how Black teens convey their thoughts about hip hop and how it corresponds to their daily lives and shapes their schooling. In due course, I believe this study will help educators to unravel the complexities of hip hop culture and incorporate this new information into efforts to reach young Black teens in urban schools.

### Significance

My study questions the notion that conventional schooling is the best way to educate African American students. I aim to grasp and interpret an aspect of hip hop culture through the voices of African American youth who live the culture. My goal is to identify the relationship between Black identities, hip hop culture and relevance to schooling. Thus, from my standpoint, hip hop culture is essentially pedagogical. I rarely find this feature articulated, implying a culture that is static. Hip hop exists in a variety of expressions with, at times, inconsistent messages, and is thus continuously changing, not static.

I hope to transform theory into practice, as I strongly suspect that hip hop can and should be utilized as an instructional instrument in the schooling process. We cannot shelve hip hop because it is significant in the lives of our students and has the power to influence the way youth view themselves as well as the world. Dei et al. (1997) find that acknowledging students' identities has the potential of improving academic achievement. Dei, et al. (2000) suggest that recognizing various identities also depends on appreciating the experiences that students bring with them into the learning environment. Students' experiences automatically include cultural experiences, of which hip hop can be regarded as one aspect.

In due course, I expect to more fully comprehend the realities faced by Black youth in regard to student engagement and high school dropout rates. I hope to augment the current research about hip hop culture by repositioning myself outside of the current debates associated

with hip hop and securing insights from young African Americans as we delve into the connections between hip hop, Black identity, and schooling.

In summary, I suspect that inner city educators can better serve their students by recognizing that hip hop is a significant part of their students' lives and that it can be used as a vehicle in the learning process. I worry that we have wasted enough time debating how to best serve out students academically without including a central cultural element, hip hop, that speaks to millions of youth around the globe and ties them together when it concentrates on many of the themes that they face as youth (marginalization, disempowerment, identity). Thus, the purpose of this research study is to investigate African American youths' sense of the connections between and among hip hop, Black identity, and schooling, and from these understandings to suggest educational approaches for engaging African American youth. With this purpose in mind, I develop a scholarly framework to guide this study.

## CHAPTER 2:

## FRAMING THE STUDY OF HIP HOP YOUTH

## Introduction

This study examines the relationships between and among hip hop culture, African American youth and public schooling. Writing about hip hop culture and the schooling of Black youth is an invigorating undertaking, since these issues often rival one another. The challenge arises from the fact that, while a noteworthy literature exists dealing with the education of Black youth, as does another literature about hip hop music and culture, inquiries into the relationships among hip hop culture, African American teens and public education remain limited. Venturing into more or less new terrain has required me to investigate several areas of study including the challenges for African American students in the education system; the question of the relevance of schooling; Black identity; and hip hop culture as a dominant cultural form for Black youth. All require careful examination as will become clearer in what follows. My approach is to examine the literature in each of these areas separately, and then discuss the relationships among them. In time, it will become clear that in overwhelmingly African American schools, serving overwhelmingly African American communities, public schooling continues to follow mainstream-affiliated ways of life that lose touch with, if not outright alienate, African American youth who have a deep commitment to hip hop culture.

Also, I will explore the thoughts of young African Americans in regard to hip hop and how it corresponds to their lives and education. Ultimately, such a framework suggests the need to answer these questions: What is the place of school in African American youth's lives? What do they make of school and what is its impact/relation to Black identity? How does school

frame/mediate/send messages about who they are? Furthermore, what is the place of hip hop in Black youth's lives, what is its impact/salience on Black identity, and how does hip hop frame/inform who they are? When comparing/contrasting home (hip hop) culture vs. school culture, how does school impinge on hip hop and how does hip hop frame schooling? Finally, what are youth's imaginings for a school culture that respects hip hop youth?

The thoughts of Black youth with reference to hip hop remain, for the most part, unfamiliar and misunderstood by educators and other authorities. Ultimately, I hope that this study will facilitate professionals in understanding the impact of popular (hip hop) culture on Black youth, and, in due course, integrate the knowledge in ways that connect with young African Americans in urban schools. But what exactly makes popular culture so popular?

### Pop Culture and Hegemony

Defining 'popular' and 'culture', which are essentially contested concepts, is complicated with multiple competing definitions of popular culture. John Storey, in *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture* (2006), discussed six definitions. The quantitative definition of culture has the problem that much "high" culture is widely favored. Pop culture is also defined as culture that is "left over" when we have decided what high culture is. However, many works straddle or cross the boundaries. Storey draws attention to the forces and relations which sustain this difference such as the educational system, a dynamic that motivates my study.

A third definition equates pop culture with Mass Culture. This is seen as a commercial culture, mass produced for mass consumption. From a Western European perspective, this may be compared to American culture. Storey (2006) states that alternatively, pop culture can be defined as an "authentic" culture of the people, but contends that this can be problematic because there are many ways of defining the "people." He argues that there is a political dimension to

popular culture; neo- Gramscian hegemony theory (the theoretical vantage point underlying my research) “...sees popular culture as a site of struggle between the ‘resistance’ of subordinate groups in society and the forces of ‘incorporation’ operating in the interests of dominant groups in society” (Gramsci, 1971).

During the twenties and thirties, in response to the rise of fascist states and the failure of working-class movements, Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci proposed to explain why socialist revolutions had not yet occurred in the developed capitalist nations. It was an assumption of Marxism that the oppressed would rise up against their oppressors and form a new society based on equality. Gramsci (1971) found his answer in a give-and-take relationship that existed between capitalists and their workers. Simply put, if workers protest their conditions as unfair, their employers would concede to fix a number of grievances and pacify the protesters, which simultaneously reaffirmed the existing power structure. On a larger level, Gramsci (1971) used the concept of hegemony to demonstrate how bourgeois capitalism imposed and held power over society. We can further clarify by placing the idea into the broader terms of dominant and subordinate groups in society. Dominant groups rule society and lead it morally, intellectually and culturally. On the surface, the subordinate groups appear to actively support the ideals, values, and goals of the dominant groups, but the relationship between the two is much more dynamic. Subordinate groups do protest, rebel and demand change in a variety of ways – demands which, if power is to be maintained and the present ideology upheld, dominant groups must address. In short, (he argued) people in power stay in power by recognizing some of the demands of the people who are not in power. Ultimately, such a process preserves the dominant ideology and the protests of the subordinate groups are incorporated into the system (Gramsci, 1971). I wondered how I could draw on Gramsci’s hegemony theory to explain the relationship



between hip hop culture and Black youth.

Using a neo-Gramscian analysis, popular culture becomes the product of the ever-changing relationship between the dominant and subordinate elements in society, a battleground for recognition between these groups. Youth subcultures (e.g., hip hop) are a good example of hegemony theory at work. Youth cultures start out as a protest against the establishment through music, clothing, and language. At first, their behavior starts off as shocking, but soon that subculture's symbols become more popular and eventually they are incorporated into the establishment, albeit in more understated forms.

Another example of resistance to the hegemony in popular culture is the countless number of films created in the late sixties and seventies, immediately following the civil rights era: *Up Tight* (1968) and *Shaft* (1971). The budding films were created by African-Americans and starred African-Americans. For itself, these films illustrate one of the areas where disadvantaged minorities assumed a format of the dominant culture to express itself, in order to make its presence and issues with the dominant culture known.

Hip hop culture epitomizes a response to the hegemony of mainstream life and has dominated pop culture around the globe. Hip hop impacts youth from diverse backgrounds, yet at the same time shapes a detachment between schooling and cultural politics. Tackling this dynamic, begins with a discussion of hip hop culture, then moves to considering how school might impinge on hip hop and hip hop might frame schooling, and ultimately, turns to address student experiences as a central component in schooling and cultural politics.

### Hip Hop

Today's youth popular culture has evolved into a phenomenon much different from what it was forty years ago. Unlike the days of Ozzie and Harriet, when youth listened to one popular

radio station and looked forward to the annual school dance, many of today's youth are taking 'risque' spring breaks, going to clubs that cater to adult audiences, participating in gang-related activities; surfing the Net; choosing from over 100 television channels; and much more. Hip hop culture can be convincingly argued to be the leading force within youth popular culture nationwide. It is the pipeline for communicating to and with young people. The hip hop pipeline connects to the mental, social, and cultural tenets of the vast majority of America's youth. As legendary rapper, activist, and author Chuck D (2007) put it, "...for many young people hip hop is CNN." Popular culture serves as a pipeline for today's youth.

### Popular Cultures

Youth popular culture is simply that which is "in," contemporary, has the stamp of approval of young people, and has mass appeal (Harper, 1999). The culture dictates what become the shared norms that provide young people with a deep sense of belonging and often with a strong preference for behaving in certain ways. Youth culture is "psycho-socio-cultural" in that its primary elements involve the reciprocal interaction of individual, social, and cultural forces (Harper, 1999).

Hip hop culture is a cultural phenomenon in the American mainstream. Nelson George (1999) suggests that we all exist in what can legitimately be called a "Hip Hop America" (1999). While some may argue that other youth cultures (eg., Rock and Punk) are just as pervasive in the lives of youth, George (1999) and Dyson (2007) profess that the masses of young people are engulfed in selected aspects of hip hop and that other popular youth cultures have embraced its vastness, thereby creating an interchange of styles for popularity.

Hip hop culture is such a popular culture, a cultural movement, which displays itself in such forms as rap music, break-dancing, DJing and graffiti (Kitwana, 2002). From its beginnings

in the Bronx, its relationship with youth culture has allowed it to thrive from urban ghettos to the suburbs of white America, and across the globe. Cultural critics (Chang, 2005; George, 1999), and scholars (Dyson, 2007; Kitwana, 2003; Rose, 1994) contributed to constructing a working definition of hip hop culture, but Rose's definition (1994) remains one of the most comprehensive. Hip hop is "a cultural form that attempts to negotiate the experience of marginalization, brutally truncated opportunity, and oppression within the cultural imperatives of African- American and Caribbean history, identity, and community" (Rose, 1994 p. 21). Here, Rose captures the complexity of hip hop as an experience which addresses the resistance that binds hip hop to the history and the context of Blacks and other marginalized people living in American today.

Hip hop is epitomized as the urban voice of the young generation, as it addresses the many social-economic concerns experienced by African-Americans. As such, hip hop integrates style of dress, speech, and politics. Kitwana (2002) and Dyson (1994) categorize hip hop as a functional reaction to the social-economic adversities experienced by a marginalized population in New York City, echoing Rose (1994). Here, rap music developed within the orb of hip hop. In this context, rap music, comparable to dance and dress, can be deemed to be "cultural objects" to hip hop's culture (Griswold, 2000, pp. 11-12).

Thus, rap music is one of the most defining components of hip hop culture, which Dyson (1994) suitably defines as: ...a form of profound musical, cultural, and social creativity. It expresses the desire of young Black people to reclaim their history, reactivate forms of Black radicalism, and contest the powers of despair and economic depression that presently besiege the Black community. Besides being the most powerful form of Black musical expression today, rap projects a style of self into the world that generates forms of cultural resistance and transforms

the ugly terrain of ghetto existence into a searing portrait of life as it must be lived by millions of voiceless people. (p. 98) Since its unveiling, nonetheless, hip hop has been the site for imparting various cultural messages, some of which have been hostile to its initial messages of opposition. Kitwana (2002) alleges that African American youth have abandoned conventional institutions and as an alternative turned to pop culture to erect their values and individuality. He states: ...the new Black culture is encoded within the images and lyrics of rap and thus help define what it means to be young and Black at the dawn of the millennium. In the process, rap music has become the primary vehicle for transmitting culture and values to this generation, relegating Black families, community centers, churches, and schools to the back burner. (p. 202) The relevance of academic investigation into hip hop culture seems obvious, especially since understanding hip hop is imperative to tackling its insinuation into the many ways Black youth digest such discussions to expand their character and worldview. It is also of the essence that educators be cognizant of this force called hip hop and understand how and why its lyrical poets captivate today's Black youth through their verbal rhymes in the form of stories.

#### Rap and Urban Communication

Rap is the verbal communication of hip hop culture. Rap directly expresses the racialization of poverty in the ghettos of American (Dyson, 1993). In this context, rap can be perceived as the music of the less fortunate, those ostensibly liberated with Civil Rights legislation. During the 1960's a considerable number of middle and upper-class African American families moved out of the inner cities. This migration towards suburbia had taken place earlier for white Americans; a social evolution that left the disadvantaged in the cities, burdened with scores of social problems: poor housing, high unemployment, high crime rates, gang violence, drug abuse, and unattainable healthcare. Problems further intensified with

economic and social policies imposed during the Reagan and Bush administrations. The lyrics of gangsta rap in the 1980s and 1990s portrayed the lives of young, inner-city Black males today. It was in this framework that hip hop was created as a vehicle for Black cultural, political and socio-economic discourse. In this respect, rap originally articulated the Black experience of surviving in the ghetto. As these encounters were expressly located within the realms of the ghetto, one can reason that a rapper's racial identity is also situated within that realm.

Hip hop culture is pulsating, staged, continuously re-collaborated, and inundated with discussions of emerging meanings. Black youth who connect with hip hop may do so as a way of sub-cultural association. As such, hip hop culture became a racialized discourse, one frequently utilized by young African Americans to denote a Black identity. Here, Black identity does not assume a fundamental way of existing, but more accurately, becomes a social interpretation used to ally those who have been labeled as Black in contemporary society. This racialized discourse and connection with hip hop leads me to ask how do urban young adults affiliated with hip hop think of and talk about the storytelling aspects and notions of self association (identity) with hip hop?

The presentation of urban Black identity through hip hop culture is also arbitrated through the many discussions pertaining to hip hop culture. Thus, hip hop is multi-faceted with conflicting premises referencing gender, power, violence, and hyper-materialism. The myriad ways that young African Americans espouse hip hop culture and decipher its opposing themes, often as a result of commercialization, prove key to my study.

### Hip Hop Identity

Hip hop can be seen as an expression of identity which emerged from an oppressed people: Hip hop emerges from complex cultural exchanges and larger social and political

conditions of disillusionment and alienation. Graffiti and rap were especially aggressive public displays of counterpresence and void. Each asserted the right to write – to inscribe one’s identity on an environment that seemed Teflon resistant to its young people of color; an environment that made legitimate avenues for material and social participation inaccessible. (Rose, 1999, p. 59-60). Hip hop is a coded culture that those outside of hip hop have difficulties understanding whether through its music, clothes, activities or language. It is used as an identifier when judging who is authentic and who is perpetrating (slang for not authentic). These identifiers serve as a measure of authenticity for consumers of hip hop and its construction of an alternative identity that more accurate it represents how youth wish to be viewed. While this alternative identity is often in response to mainstream morés and is thus shaped by a master narrative from mainstream culture, this counternarrative can be seen as a more authentic view into the lives and voices of hip hop heads.

Hip hop gives voice to a population that is rarely heard. The content of hip hop music also speaks to the masses of oppressed people for the same reasons: The cries of pain, anger, sexual desire, and pleasure that rappers articulate speak to hip hop’s vast fan base for different reasons. For some, rappers offer symbolic prowess, a sense of Black energy and creativity in the face of omnipresent oppressive forces; others listen to rap with an ear toward the hidden voices of the oppressed, hoping to understand America’s large, angry, and ‘unintelligible’ population. (Rose, 1994, p.19) Hip hop culture has been chosen by many of the students of today as a defining characteristic of their identity (Chang, 2005; George, 1998; Kitwana, 2002; Mahiri, 1998; Rose, 1994). (I return to identity in a subsequent section.) This identity aligned with culture lies within a framework where power (especially of a privileged group over an under class) is made evident in school pedagogy.

## Gramscian Theory

The Gramscian theory of hegemony positions my arguments about hip hop culture and identity (where race is an explicit issue). Assuming that mainstream culture is instructed through socialization, in societal institutions (like schools), the notion of supremacy stems from the perspective of an existing conflict between the privileged and the masses, between “normal” and “other.” Using hegemony allows following the struggle between the perspectives of the powerful and powerless. For instance, in an attempt to safeguard the status quo, influential organizations continuously struggle to channel the opinions of the masses through the communication and justification of certain forms of “status” and control over cultural communications (Gramsci, 1971). In what follows, I articulate how Gramscian theory intersects with my study’s goals relative to education.

## Education and Hegemony

Giroux (2002) connects to Gramsci’s writings, and characterizes the function of education in terms of culture and power. He depicts culture and power as interconnected to create understandings that substantiate the interests of different ethnic groups, classes and genders of a specific populace over others. He summarizes the usual (and he believes misguided) goal of education: “Culture is about the production and legitimization of particular ways of life transmitted in schools through overt and hidden curricula so as to legitimate the cultural capital of dominant groups, while marginalizing the voice of the subaltern” (p. 55).

Gramsci (1971) also exposes this veiled curriculum in his argument about schooling: The child studies the literary history of the books written in that language, the political history, the achievements of the men who spoke that language. His education is determined by the whole of this organic complex, by the fact that he has followed that itinerary, if only in a purely literal

sense, he has passed through those various stages, etc. He has plunged into history and acquired a historicizing understanding of the world and of life, which becomes a second – nearly spontaneous – nature, since it is not inculcated pedantically with an openly educational intention... Logical, artistic, psychological experience was gained unaware, without a continual self-consciousness. (p. 39) Gramsci draws attention to the standardizing feature within conventional schooling arrangements. Schools are, therefore, perceived as facilities where upcoming generations are taught to take on the positions of those in power, in turn, upholding societal norms. Or in other words, public schools authenticate political structures and subtly contribute to the reproduction of inequalities.

Thus, Giroux's (1981) conception of ideology is closely related to Gramsci's notion of hegemony. In schools, hegemony functions not only "through the significations embedded in school texts, films, and 'official' teacher discourse" but also "in those practiced experiences that need no discourse, the message of which lingers beneath a structural silence" (p. 21). In the Gramscian conception, hegemony is not simply the imposition of the ideology of a dominant class upon subordinate classes; rather it is "a mode of control that has to be fought for constantly in order to be maintained" in changing historical circumstances (Giroux, 1981, p. 23).

Thus, schools can also play a role in stifling nonmainstream cultural identities. Groups that do not adhere to dominant viewpoints may be perceived as antagonistic. Gramsci was clear that learning was not something that came easily for the majority of young people. "The individual consciousness of the overwhelming majority of children reflects social and cultural relations which are different from and antagonistic to those which are represented in the school curricula" (Gramsci, 1971, p. 35). Gramsci (1977) maintained that schools could only achieve success with the active participation of pupils and, in order for this to happen, the school must



relate to everyday life. This did not mean that education should not include abstract ideas but that philosophical concepts, formal logic, rules of grammar etc. needed to be acquired in school “through work and reflection” (p. 42). A learner had to be active not a “passive and mechanical recipient.” The relationship between the pupils’ psychology and the educational forms must always be “active and creative, just as the relation of the worker to his tools is active and creative” (Gramsci, 1977, p. 42).

When connecting culture and pedagogy, Gramsci redefines knowledge of political gaps by including foundations where customs are formed and expressed. So, it is essential that pop culture and everyday life be incorporated in studies of dominance. Gramsci considers culture as political; therefore, culture often operates as a useful instrument to maintain power disparities amongst the influential and the marginalized. For instance, power is skewed in favor of Whites as a result of historical oppression against minorities, which persists through continuous marginalization of experiences and knowledge of African Americans and others. Thus, in Giroux’s (1981) view: Gramsci’s notion that hegemony represents a pedagogical relationship through which the legitimacy of meaning and practice is struggled over makes it imperative that a theory of radical pedagogy take as its central task analysis of how hegemony functions in schools and how various forms of resistance and opposition either challenge or help sustain it. (p. 26) Therefore, Giroux (1981) contends that educators must begin by asking questions about the focus of resistance already employed by students in order to develop effective pedagogical strategies. As a starting point, he suggests asking: First, in what way do specific forms of resistance manifest themselves and what is their relationship to determinants in the wider social order? Second, how do these forms of resistance often end up supporting the modes of domination they attack? Put another way, how do the oppositional elements used by students to

wrest some power from the authority of the school do the work in bringing about ‘the future that others have mapped for them’? (p. 30) Unfortunately, many of these debates remain outside the mainstream, further reinforcing their insignificance to mainstream culture. It seems reasonable that in today’s youth culture in urban areas hip hop culture serves as a focus of resistance to mainstream attempts at socialization. Thus, I wonder to what extent hip hop might be anti-hegemonic, resistant and consequently might disrupt the norm and provide options through pedagogy.

### Hip Hop as Resistance

One of James Mittelman’s (2000) conclusions is that “resistance movements shape and are constitutive of cultural processes” (p. 165). Hip hop seems the most local and global subculture in the world, which suggests it has sufficient breadth and depth to be counter-hegemonic. Yet, on the other hand, hip hop is the most local in that it is adapted by a variety of cultures. It not only incorporates the sounds of a given culture (in the form of samples), but also it assimilates the culture itself. Hip hop is the most global subculture in the various representations of the culture have manifested themselves on every corner of the earth (Mitchell, 2002).

As I stated earlier, the history of hip hop can be traced back to Africa. In African society, history was an oral tradition. Slaves in America continued this tradition in the form of spirituals, which were a form of resistance. Blues, jazz, rhythm and blues, soul, and funk provided elements taken up by hip hop as well. Thus, similar forms of culture and resistance have a meaningful and rich historical context.

Most observers see hip hop as a reactionary force because it glorifies material-ism, violence, misogyny, and drug use; and it is true that these are aspects of the culture. However,

hegemony is always at work and many fail to see what is behind those commodified and co-opted images and stereotypes. Part of the hegemonic process is assimilating parts of the subordinate group for the purpose of spontaneous consent. According to Gramsci (1971), simultaneously, the subordinate group adapts parts of the dominant group, thus their history and identity is “fragmented and episodic” (pp. 54-55).

Much of hip hop’s discourse directly correlates to the conditions of dominant being with the conditions of subordinate being. A well-known example of such a text would be Grandmaster Flash’s song “The Message” (1982). This messages and it’s countless counterparts portray grim portraits of reality that depict “the confrontation of a world without illusions with wretched illusions of the ‘heart,’ it is the confrontation of the real world with the melodramatic world, the dramatic access to the consciousness that destroys the myths of the melodrama” (Althusser, 1969, p. 134). Hip hop artists are implicitly blaming the hip hop community’s current condition on American society, which is controlled by a specific group of people, the “industry,” who have self-serving interests.

America has with little doubt committed many human rights violations in “the violent process of state consolidation” and expansion including, but certainly not limited to, the use of brute coercive power and the oppression of women (Shapiro, 2002, p. 31). Knowing, consciously that these things are part of the dominant culture makes the subalterns adopt it into their lifestyles. This can be perceived as resistance because the agents are revealing flaws in the hegemonic order by acting them out and stating it is your fault because you perpetuated unbalanced power structures that cultivate such states of being.

#### Agents of Resistance

A variety of agents of hip hop participate in disc jockeying, break-dancing, and/or

emceeding. However, the hip hop community also consists of fans. In the United States, Hughes (2002) states that “whites purchase roughly 60% of hip hop records and many of these consumers live in middle-class suburbia (p. 73). Here, hip hop culture exceeds the boundaries of race, class, gender, religion, and region. Thus, the foundation of hip hop agents is very diverse. There are organic intellectuals in the hip hop community, who are exposing people to the subtle forms of resistance. The significance of this can be seen when Gramsci (1971) writes, Critical understanding of the self takes place therefore through a struggle of political “hegemonies” and of opposing directions, first in the ethical and then in the political proper, in order to arrive at the working out at a higher level of one’s conception of reality. Consciousness of being part of a hegemonic force (that is to say political consciousness) is the first stage towards progressive self-consciousness in which theory and practice will finally be one. Thus the unity of theory and practice is not just a matter of mechanical fact, but part of a historical process, whose elementary and primitive phase is to be found in the sense of being “different” and “apart,” in an instinctive feeling of independence, and which progresses to the level of real possession of a single and coherent conception of the world (p. 333).

The influence of hip hop agents is very renowned in youth culture (Bennett, 1999; Clay, 2003). More significantly, they are prominent role models who promote the understanding of organic theory and its practice. What is implied is the promotion of progressive self-consciousness, which, as Gramsci acknowledged, is the first step toward opposing the forces of hegemony. Chuck D. (1992), front man for Public Enemy demonstrated a clear conception of hegemony when he writes: Hollywood’s dishonesty, distortions, myths, and misconceptions about Black people as nothing but watermelon stealin’, chicken eatin’, knee knockin’, eye poppin’, lazy, crazy, dancin’, submissive, “Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks,”

ever since D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* (1915), all the way up to the 1950s- which is a forty-year period of straight up lies, propaganda, derogatory images, and bullshit- have been spread across not only in the United States, but the entire world. That has had a major effect, not only on how society looks at us, but how we look at ourselves. A lot of Blacks In Hollywood right now are controlled by certain foolish stereotypes that they feel they must perpetuate in order to be accepted and keep steady work. (p. 52) Thus, hip hop's resistance acts on numerous levels: individual, national, and international. Once a flash of moral insight of critical self-understanding takes place, numerous strategies of resistance can be engaged in by the agents of hip hop.

For these reasons, Giroux (1989) and Banks (1993) addressed student experience as a central component in schooling and cultural politics. The way in which student experience is produced, organized, and legitimated in schools has become an increasingly important theoretical consideration for understanding how schools produce and authorize particular forms of meaning and implement teaching practices consistent with the ideological principles of the dominant society. Rather than focusing exclusively on how schools reproduce the dominant social order through social and cultural reproduction or how students contest the dominant logic through various forms of resistance, radical educators have attempted more recently to analyze the terrain of schooling as a struggle over particular ways of live.

In this view the process of being schooled cannot be fully conceptualized within the limiting parameters of the reproduction/resistance model. Instead, being schooled is analyzed as part of a complex and often contradictory set of ideological and material processes through which the transformation of experience takes place. Schooling is understood as part of the production and legitimization of social forms and subjectivities as they are organized within relations of power and meaning that either enable or limit human capacities for self and social

empowerment (Giroux, 1989, p. 1).

Often the denunciation of popular culture has been led by education scholars who maintain that popular culture is in effect poisoning the minds of our children. Some recommend middle class cultural literacy as the solution (e.g., McWhorter, 2003; Hirsch, 1988; Ravitch, 1974). Giroux (1988), on the other hand, has taken a more comprehensive view of pop culture and has seen popular culture, as a significant site of struggle over meaning and, as an *academic* site. Youth today are becoming more connected to popular culture with advances in media (e.g., cell phones and internet), with hip hop culture's accessibility, and spread.

However, the literature on popular culture and education lacks a thorough account of many urban youths' embracing hip hop culture, instead of engaging education. Banks (1993) highlights "mainstream academic culture" when he affirms the detachment between students' home culture and school culture. Many different cultures exist in the United States, even if some are esteemed while others are perceived as blemished. Marginalized people often must sacrifice their feelings about their community to assume the positions of the dominant culture. Consequently, minority cultures may often take an oppositional approach to the standards of culture held by those in power and more passionately identify with their own culture. Consequently, I question to what extent might urban young adults experience hip hop as social resistance?

Ultimately, the literature on popular culture and education falls short and fails to account for many urban youths' embracing hip hop culture, since today's urban learners appear to embrace hip hop as opposed to schooling. Thus, I wonder about the place of public schooling in the lives of urban learners?

## Public Schooling

Public education has central roles in U.S. society. Quality of education became a hallmark of the Civil Rights struggles. That is, an ideal of public education harkens back to Civil Rights rhetoric – an education is a dream, a goal ensuring that every American knows enough, and has all the requisite skills, to take a full part in our country’s social, economic, and political life (Gutmann, 1987). Public education is not a static institution but one responsive to the needs of its citizenry (Howe, 1997). Thus, schooling proves central to being a democracy in spite of public education’s falling short of the mark for some.

## Urban Schooling

When educational content in the U.S. is presented from a Eurocentric perspective, it promotes certain social values and endorses a particular social ethos. This poses an ethical problem in a pluralistic society where the parents of many students may not embrace such a monolithic public education system, one where educators have never been clearly empowered to teach against biased thoughts, and where many Black youth do not find school relevant to their daily lives.

The decrepit condition of far too many inner-city schools the greater likelihood that teachers there lack adequate credentials or teach out of their specialty (Kozol, 1992), and students’ lower test scores (Kozol, 1992) demonstrate that government is not always successful providing schools that give children opportunities to learn what is needed to become full participants in modern society. Nor does faithfully implementing the decisions of a majority ensure that schools *will* produce graduates who have the knowledge and skills necessary for full participation in our country’s social, economic, and political life. For instance, majorities can decide to run schools in ways that fit their members’ values and serve their members’ children

effectively, but that may not meet the needs of families in the minority (Apple, 1990). Majorities can also mandate that teaching will be done in a particular way, even if other feasible methods might be better for some children (Delpit, 1996; Ladson-Billings, 1995). These outcomes might be called “democratic,” but they do not achieve public education’s goal: to help every child gain the knowledge and skills needed to be a fully functioning member of an open, diverse, economically prosperous and fair society. Thus, I began to wonder about the schooling experiences of urban youth.

Urban educators live with momentous challenges in dealing with economically disadvantaged children. Race-based data in the U.S. have increased; yet, these statistics reinforced negative stereotypes, failed to address low student performance, or blamed educators (Anderson, 1999). The data have also raised the issue of how some students, notably racial minorities, are being denied full opportunities by the public school system. Finally, the problem of Black youth disengagement from school is well documented (Mazzuca, et. Al., 1997; Dei, 1997; Solomon, 1992). Ultimately, who are urban learners?

### Urban Learners

The inner-city is a hamlet apart from the larger society. Racially segregated and situated in an impoverished core community in which violence, drugs, and crime are rampant, the inner city is characterized by a street/decent dynamic. During their early years, most of the children accept the legitimacy of the school, and then eagerly approach the task of learning. As time passes, however in their relentless campaign for the respect that will be meaningful in their public environment, youth increasingly embrace the street code. By fourth grade, enough children have opted for the code of the street that it begins to compete effectively with the culture of the school, and the code begins to dominate their public culture – in school as well as



out – becoming a way of life for many and eventually conflating with the culture of the school itself. Such a school becomes a primary staging area for the campaign for respect. (Anderson, 1999, p. 93) Anderson (1999) underscores the significance of campaigning for *respect* as opposed to academic achievement among Black urban students. In school, decent kids learn to code switch (and move between street and decent dipoles) while street kids become more committed to the street.

Anderson (1999) views code-switching as largely a function of persistent poverty and local neighborhood effects, which include social isolation and alienation, but he also contends that it strongly relates to family background, available peers, and role models. For many estranged young Black people, attending school and doing well becomes negatively associated with acting white (Fordham, 1996). In what is in essence a racially Black street-world, a young man develops a strong need to demonstrate to others that he can handle himself socially and physically on the ghetto streets, a prevailing Black street-world. Ultimately, a young man develops a strong need to demonstrate to others that he can handle himself socially and physically on the ghetto streets, a prevailing community value in and of itself. Here, “street knowledge” is venerated, and the pursuit of it for those who have it begins to outweigh, ultimately competing with, if not undermining, the mission of the school (Anderson, 1999).

Unfortunately, this cycle results from many complex factors, but especially from the gaps that exist between the versions of normality communicated in the school system, and the lived realities of the students. Moreover, in an environment where schooling experiences seem irrelevant to students’ realities, coupled with insufficient training for educators in helping young people make key connections between their school work and their futures, a student may perceive school as a waste of time. This is true, particularly, if the young person is aware of the

oppression that is, more often than not, implicit in formal education (Kozol, 1991). According to Anderson, many schools fail because they rarely make lessons culturally and socially applicable to students from marginalized communities, while at the same time teaching students to embrace a white agenda.

For educational experiences to be relevant to culturally different students, they must reflect and connect with students' particular life experiences and perspectives. This need reflects the fact that learning is more effective when new ideas are related to prior knowledge and initially are taught in ways familiar to students (Boggs, Watson Gregeo & McMillen, 1985). Students learn in different ways and under different conditions, many of which are governed by their cultural socialization. The process of learning involves more than intellectual ability and mastery of cognitive content. It also includes the psycho-emotional disposition of students and teachers, and the environmental settings in which teaching and learning take place.

Another area of concern, and one that I have experienced, relates to the ways that school administrators frequently operate on a flawed assumption that their values and beliefs are and should be the standard for everyone. They presume that their definition of knowledge and how it can be transferred embraces decontextualized rules of pedagogy, which stand impartial from particular urban cultures. Quite the contrary, home/community affiliations (culture) influence and shape all dimensions of the learning and teaching processes employed in schools (Gay, 1994).

The normalization of the dominant perspective over others throughout the educational process may also impose adverse consequences on minority students, principally on identity formation. While these issues succeed by placing inner city students' realities and experiences on hold, or by portraying these viewpoints as buried, a student's accomplishments are inextricably

related to the judicious acknowledgement of these norms. Therefore, in order to succeed, many minority students either find themselves assuming a façade of racelessness, or by submitting to these norms (i.e. acting white) (Fordham, 1998). What seems clearly communicated is that the recipe for achievement is revealed through a separation from one's racial identity, and consequently from one's sense of self. As such, this proves an oppressive circumstance. Taken together, such expectations add credence to the merit placed upon whiteness, as this racialization becomes indistinguishable from and interconnected with success (Howe, 1997; Young, 1990).

Therefore, an education of this sort is undermined because the mission of the school cannot be on par, or lacks concordance, with the mission of the kids. For students to accept such a school would be to forfeit themselves and to act white, to surrender street credibility for the educational ideology. However, that ideology has not been effectively sold to such disenfranchised students to persuade them to give up 'street creds' (credibility) and embrace the school mission. Subsequently, the dominant society attempts to sell its message to marginalized students in a setting in which students have little or no respect for that society. In reality, the code of the street vies very effectively with conventional values. Ultimately, as students begin to recognize the school and its representatives as reluctant to listen to them and willing to demean them, espousing oppositional culture becomes imperative as a way to salvage a sense of self worth. Over time, the school's mission is undermined, while ironically it remains a sanctuary where students can go and expect relative order.

Furthermore, if students feel that the school environment is alien and hostile toward them or does not affirm and value who they are, they will not be able to concentrate as thoroughly as they might on academic tasks. The stress and anxiety that accompany this lack of support and affirmation cause their mental attention, energy, and other efforts to be split between protecting

their psyches from attack and attending to academic tasks (Gay, 1994). Thus, I began to wonder about the relevance of schooling to urban youth and to what extent urban youth face a street/decent set of choices in their schools?

If, then, students find themselves in a push-pull dilemma between school success and home community affiliations might we consider influences on identity. I am also curious how urban youth associated with hip hop have experienced public schooling and what might their vision for connecting with hip hop youth in public schools be? In what follows, I hope to persuade you of the importance of hip hop identity to urban youth.

### Identity and Schooling

A great deal of research about the relationship between identity and schooling exists (Braithwaite & James, 1996; Solomon, 1992). Crooks (2004) and Ginwright (2004) addressed the need to engage Black student identities in the classroom. For instance, Crooks found that fusing socialization, language, and cultural capital to identity had considerable influence on student achievement. Students maintained that when given the chance to take on their own interests, they were more inclined to connect with the educational process. Clearly, Crooks made a compelling case as he emphasized the need to engage identity in classroom learning. Here, hip hop became a valid mode of expression that drew on indigenous practices and adapted them to blend into American contexts. In this respect, hip hop culture is expressed through words, images and past experiences, and as such, of central interest is how such knowledge (or these implicitly held understandings) becomes internalized and expressed in school.

Solomon (1997) explored the relationship between identity and schooling by examining student/teacher associations and learning outcomes. Here, he suggested that students establish stronger connections to the educational system when they experience educators with similar

racial or cultural backgrounds. Accordingly, he implied that teachers from minority groups are more likely to satisfy the role of educator and role model for these youth. Therefore, one can make a case that teachers who share similar racial/ethnic backgrounds with their students and the roles they satisfy for students denotes not only the significance of the student's self-worth but the identities of educators. Noteworthy in Solomon's research is his position that the connection between students' and teachers' identities need not be rooted on likeness, but more on common experiences. While this idea divides society as either powerful or powerless, dominant or marginal, and fails to notice differences in experiences based on race/ethnicity, culture or class, the prospect for marginalized individuals to realize certain roles may be very real.

### Successful Schooling

How does successful schooling occur? Dei, et al. (2000) put forward the necessity for comprehensive schooling practices. Dei, et al. (1997) emphasized the need for decentering Eurocentric philosophies to create an opening for indigenous knowledge; furthermore, they underscored the need for spiritual engagement, as well as for enhanced language modification to facilitate a relationship with students' identity development.

While culture seems a background issue in Dei, et al. (1997), it becomes a more salient theme in Solomon's (1997) work. Throughout his study, he finds that cultural similarities between the identities of students and educators fuels engagement in schooling. "...Culture is very much the issue in an environment of culturalised racism, it is the explanation of choice for the underachievement and 'over-achievement' of racial minorities" (Razak, 1995, p. 38 ). She maintains her position by arguing the centrality of cultural identities in relation to anti-racism education: "Moreover, attention to cultural identities and histories as they develop in the context of racism may be the bases for anti-racist schooling practices" p. 78). Culture, too, can emerge as

something political in accordance to the way it is positioned in the classroom.

Gay (1994) also makes a connection between a positive cultural identity, social adaptation and student achievement. Although Gay posits ethnic identity as being linked to educational achievement, she also suggests that opportunities for engaging in these Otherized senses of self can be found in students' and educator's candidness when exploring these fields. And so, she describes personal intervention as crucial to identity development, and associates empowerment to healthier relationships between students and their teachers. This suggests linking hip hop culture to ethnic identity and exploring its relationship to schooling and academic achievement.

### Hip Hop, Youth, and Schooling

Hip hop culture and especially rap music have faced much criticism often because of rap's use of misogynistic, hyper-sexual, homophobic, violent, drug- promoting and ultra-materialistic lyrics. There are, indeed, negative messages woven throughout some of the music. Sometimes it is difficult to disagree with Sowell (2005) and McWhorter (2003) when they criticize rap for its negative impact on Black youth.

But such a task misses a key point. Students enter schools having already affiliated with hip hop's frame of reference. This is emblematic of the fact that many students have already become disenchanted with schooling systems that persistently give them messages that there is, at best, something wrong with them that needs to be "fixed," and at worst something about them that signals that they and others like them have no place in U.S. society. Opposition to hip hop culture in schools seems likely to join a growing list of evidence, a list accumulating in some students' minds, that schools are not for "people like me."

Clearly, such an approach is not the intention of public schooling in the U.S. To avoid

this, scholars call for culturally and socially relevant schooling for students from historically marginalized communities (e.g., Ladson-Billings, 1995; Delpit, 1996). Thus, disrupting majority-affiliated practices that lead to alienating students who affiliate with hip hop culture requires deploying new school practices that openly demonstrate a respect for hip hop culture and for those who connect with it. This raises questions about how educators might understand the significance of hip hop culture questions not often taken up by scholarly writers (Rose, 1994, a notable exception). Thus, I propose to engage research participants in a conversation about how such a re-visioning of schooling might proceed.

Thus, as I have argued above, how do race, culture, and relevance intersect and contribute to educational propositions for educating African American students, and what are the intersections between African American identities, hip hop culture, and relevance of schooling?

#### Research Questions

Along the way, as I laid out my framework for this study, I articulated important research questions that guide this study:

1. How do urban young adults affiliated with hip hop think and talk about the storytelling aspects and notions of self associated with hip hop?
2. To what extent might urban young adults experience hip hop as social resistance?
3. How have urban youth associated with hip hop think and talk about place of school in their lives, experiences with public schooling and it's relevance to their lives?
4. What might their vision/advice for connecting hip hop youth with public schooling?

In what follows in Chapter 3, I develop a set of methodological strategies intended to unearth answers to these questions.

## CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

### Introduction

This study joins others that have begun to explore the links between popular culture and schooling (e.g., Giroux, 1989; Mahiri, 1998; Morrell & Andrade, 2002). In fact, it joins a few studies exploring the particular ways in which students make sense of their own experiences in hip hop culture and in school. In particular, this study explores the connection between hip hop and schooling, and begins a conversation about how hip hop might be used to engage students in the classroom. Delving into the meanings that Black youth collect from hip hop is an assignment well-matched to a qualitative research framework. Here, I develop a quasi-ethnographic research design and methodology for this study. The use of such an approach allows making appropriate adjustments and modifications throughout the research process, as will become clearer in what follows.

### Theoretical/Discursive Vantage Points

The interpretivist paradigm seems the most useful paradigm for my investigation, as it allowed me to understand hip hop and schooling from an insider's vantage points. The humanist activities of respecting youth's culture and language are other aspects of the study. As an interpretivist, I observed my participants at hip hop events, talked with them, and depicted their sense of the world in a manner that will help others understand participants' ways of seeing and experiencing the world.

Unlike some other paradigms, the interpretivist perspective builds on the constructivist notion that persons individually and collectively construct reality. Interpretive approaches rely heavily on naturalistic methods and data: observation of everyday activities, interviewing



insiders about those activities and how insiders make meaning of events, and analysis of artifacts (things used or produced by insiders). Such research approaches have their roots in sociological and anthropological methods of inquiry (Schensul, et. al, 1999). These methods ensure an adequate dialogue between the researcher and those with whom they interact in order to collaboratively construct a meaningful understanding of participants' experiences. The study of insiders' views on hip hop is well suited to qualitative research because of its capacity to capture the dynamics and intricacies of a socio-cultural "happening" using qualitative data, most notably narratives (Schensul, et.al, 1999). Analysis provided an opportunity to focus on the context in which hip hop experiences take place and focus on participants and their complexities, rather than on simplistic mathematical models of their behaviors (Schensul, et. al, 1999). In what follows, I lay out a research plan for accomplishing this study's goals. In particular, my study utilized semi-structured, open-ended interviews with African American young adults, asking them to articulate their interactions with hip hop, especially unpacking hip hop via culturally situated narratives. By implementing a narrative inquiry, I intend to examine insiders' views about the experiences of African Americans who have incorporated hip hop cultural texts as a way to position themselves within the Black community. .

#### Site and Participants

Participants encompassed fourteen, 18-25 year-old African Americans, seven men and seven women. All affiliated with hip hop and considered themselves hip hop, cultural-text consumers who had attended conventional urban public schools (those operated in ways consonant with a dominant cultural orientation). Recruitment procedures ensured voluntary participation based on full and accurate information and attention to equity. The recruitment of participants for research was be equitable. This meant that the investigator must insure that,

where possible, diversity of ethnicity, socio-economic status, and gender be built into the research design. This helped to assure that a variety of groups have an opportunity to participate in and/or benefit from a research study, and no one group is made to bear the majority of the burdens inherent by participating. (HIC, wayne.edu) Furthermore, the recruitment process “must take into account the privacy and confidentiality rights of potential participants” (HIC, wayne.edu). All research activities were authorized by the Internal Review Board of Wayne State University.

I utilized purposive sampling to locate participants knowledgeable about this study’s focus. My participants were selected primarily from hip hop venues as I seek those who meet my inclusion criteria. Schensul and LeCompte (1999) refer to inclusion criteria as “specific traits, behaviors or other qualifying features that define the individual as someone of interest to the researcher” (p. 260).

Recruitment began by approaching potential participants at hip hop events, briefly describing my study and participant’s rights, and asking if this person might be interested in participating. If so, I determined if they met inclusion criteria and only then gained contact information. At a later time, I contacted potential participants to schedule a time to meet, complete informed consent, and for those consenting complete the interview. In addition, former students, who have graduated, allowed use of a snowball sample. Several former students have remained in communication with me over the years and I invited them to participate in my study since I no longer have a teacher/student relationship with them. Snowball or network sampling techniques “recruit initial or index individuals who then identify other people they know who possess the characteristics desired by the researcher” (Schensul, 1998; Watter & Biernacki, 1989). Participants or informants with whom contact has already been made use their social

networks to refer me to other people who could potentially participate or contribute to my study. Thus, early participants led me to others, who might otherwise not have been as easily accessible to me, but who meet the criteria. Through such practices the chain grew until an adequate sample was obtained. Overall, this process captured a multi-dynamic portrayal of the experiences and interactions of African Americans as it relates to hip hop, their identity, and schooling. This technique assured that at minimum some of the participants were acquainted with one another.

Furthermore, as part of the interview I obtain “legally effective informed consent” of my participants. The elements of informed consent are mandated in 45 CFR 46.116, 38 CFR 16.116 and 21 CFR 50.25 (Human Investigations Committee, Wayne State University). Informed consent is one of the primary ethical requirements when conducting research with human participants; it reflects the basic principle of respect for persons. Informed consent seeks to ensure that prospective participants understood the nature of the research and can knowledgeably and voluntarily decide whether or not to participate (HIC.wayne.edu). The guidelines that I have developed to recruit participants are sensitive to the social and cultural contexts from which participants were recruited. I did everything in my power to make certain that participants understand what my study entailed, what was expected of them if they participated, and how their privacy would be respected. Within my guidelines, I took special care to avoid saying anything that could be interpreted as coercive, but also did not recruit former students who might feel pressured to participate. The voluntary nature of participation in this research study was always emphasized.

Finally, qualitative researchers should undergo formal research ethics training, as I have completed the HIC Mandatory Training through Wayne State University prior to entering the field and recruiting participants and have gained HIC permission for research.

## Data Collection

My investigation employed two types of data collection: semi-structured qualitative interviews (60-90 min each) and one focused group interview (60-90 min) to ensure member checking, expand on ideas and fill in the gaps (Appendix A). My data collection spanned a four month period from June through September 2010.

I began my data collection with open-ended interviewing, “which has the lowest power of representation and the broadest range of exploratory potential” (LeCompte, et al.,1999, p. 164). Interview through data analysis also increased trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As I gradually discover the dynamics of my study, I began to categorize and subcategorize important themes or patterns that emerged from the data. I prepare interview questions in advance, however, the responses were open-ended. I utilized individual semi-structure interviews because, as LeCompte, et al (1999) contend, “they combine the flexibility of the unstructured, open-ended interview with the directionality and agenda of the survey instrument to produce focused, qualitative, textual data” (p. 149) and “semi-structure interviewing and observation offer us the most systematic opportunity for the collection of qualitative data” (p. 164). These techniques are appropriate for identifying salient dynamics. Open-ended interview questions were designed to gain insight, help facilitate participants to share and engage in the interview process. Hip hop culture, schooling, identity, and relevance served as the overarching topics in the development of the questions used in this study. For example: I utilized an interview approach designed by LeCompte, Schensul and Schensul (1999) who noted that open-ended interviews are best used when “the issues to be explored are not very well understood and the facilitators would like to provide the broadest possible latitude for response” (p. 88). LeCompte, et, al (1999) also contend that questions “should not be vague, leading, or mis-leading” (p. 91). In addition, I avoided

asking questions that are intrusive or of an overly personal nature which include questions pertaining to drug abuse, crime, or personal finance. Participants were interviewed in public settings where privacy could be assured, such as university settings or public libraries. Each interview lasted approximately one hour and was audio recorded. The interviews were set up via phone call or email and scheduled at the participant's convenience.

One focused group interview (5 or more participants) was coordinated after the semi-structured interviews and preliminary analysis were completed. I anticipated that during the focused group interview my participants would have an opportunity to elaborate on their interactions with hip hop culture, and provide information that they may have not presented during their semi-structured interviews, as well as provide an opportunity for participants to corroborate and/or improve on my interpretations. The focused group interview was structured in the same manner as the semi-structured interview and allowed participants to overtly participate in the focus group. The focus group occurred in a public place where privacy could be assured and lasted approximately one hour. Like each interview, the focus group was also audio tape recorded and transcribed verbatim for qualitative analysis. Participants in this study are identified by an alias name assigned to them. A list linking alias to given name was kept as a computer file on my password-protected PC. Consent was gained using an information sheet. This master list was destroyed after data collection. Contact information was destroyed after dissertation defense.

Data for my study was recorded in a variety of ways. Interviews were recorded on my phone/pocket pc using the Pocket Microsoft Word program. I also kept a notepad in case of technical difficulties. I recorded all of the interviews with an Apple 40 gigabyte I-Pod with a recorder attachment. This feature allowed me to capture and import all my recordings directly

into a digital format bypassing any tapes or other external devices. After all recordings, I transferred the files to my password-protected laptop computer for storage, as well as to an external hard drive to back up audio files and verbatim transcriptions. All proper nouns ,which have potential to challenge confidentiality were replaced with pseudonyms or other non-specific identifiers, such as replacing “Chicago” with “large Midwestern city.”

### Data Analysis

The narrative process “seeks to collect data to describe... lives” (Marshall & Rossman, 1995, p. 86) and narrative analysis “can be applied to ...an in-depth interview” (p. 86). In analyzing narratives, the researcher works to actively find the voice of the participant in a particular time, place or setting (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). I focused on analyzing the spoken words of my participants. According to Spradley (1980), words are symbols that represent meanings for an individual and different individuals could hold different meaning for the same word(s). I strove to depict participants’ stories and experiences, based upon their recollections and statements about their own feelings and perspectives, by completing a domain analysis (Spradley, 1980).

When doing domain analysis, I first conducted a preliminary search for patterns of sameness. For example, for each piece of data, I sought terms (phrases used by participants) that all relate in the same way to an over-arching idea. Such semantic domains preserve the meanings insiders give to events. I then searched for other relationships in my data (e.g.- cause-effect, location, spatial, etc.) (Spradley, 1980), until I find salient domains and exhausted possible included terms.

Such coding was an interpretive technique that began with organizing data (LeCompte, et. al, 1999). I transcribe and coded each narrative after each interview, locating themes and

patterns that emerged. Taxonomic analysis followed. Here, relationships within domains (locating subdomains) and between domains were sought. The analysis of interviews were further coded using the (ETHNOGRAPH program) and employing the conceptual taxonomy or “tree diagram” (LeCompte, et. al, 1999; Spradley, 1980). Ultimately, I located patterns of difference in the data by completing a componential analysis. This allowed examining nuances in the data, that is, seeing multiplicity of meanings given to events.

Patterns in the data emerged from the detailed descriptions of data in the context and I report them with sufficient detail and precision to allow judgments about transferability to be made by the reader (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). My obligation as a researcher is to ensure that my findings can be generalized to the population. I also provide my audience with evidence that if my inquiry were replicated with the same or similar respondents in the same or similar context, the findings could be repeated (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The dissertation chairperson performed an inquiry audit by examining documentation and a running account of the process of the inquiry. I provided an adequate trail to enable the auditor to determine if the conclusions, interpretations, and recommendations can be traced to their sources and if they are supported by the inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

I also utilized a research journal which allowed me to track my day-to-day research tasks; mark my influence on the field and its influence on me; and note emerging, potential findings and what I did to check them. My research journal was also be used as a tool to pen my experiences, mindsets, biases, as well as provide me an opportunity to reflect upon the methods of my work in progress.

### Researcher Reflexivity

A researcher's acceptance in the site studied proves central to qualitative research. Here, I explain why I am qualified to take on this task. By the 1990's, hip hop had penetrated the inner city and was permeating throughout the suburbs, including with my own children. I, too, found myself seduced by hip hop's allure, not simply because of its innovative and distinctive beats, but more significantly, its thought-provoking lyrics. I had always enjoyed all genres of music from the expressive depth of Frederick Chopin to the aggressive, fast tempos of Metallica. Through rap lyrics, however, I was able to understand the lives of African Americans from a different perspective, one that, for the most part, was not communicated in college textbooks. In fact, I find it ingenious that Black youth have utilized rap as a vehicle to communicate their views about social and political injustices to the rest of society. I became acquainted with knowledge that was extraordinary and not learned in school. Once a consumer of hip hop cultural text, I began to understand and appreciate African American youth culture.

As a teacher, day after day, I observed my students bobbing their heads in the hallways, head phones glued to their ears and do-rags hanging out of their pockets. They free-styled to the latest rap lyrics, backpacks slightly drooped over their shoulders while boys tugged on their baggy, sagging pants. Down the hall I often heard adult voices shouting, "Pull your pants up," "Take your hat off." I wondered about the messages heard.

Nonetheless, I enjoyed conversing with my students about up-and-coming hip hop artists, the latest dance moves and urban street wear, but more importantly, their personal struggles. Through our dialogues, they learned about me as I about them. Thus, over time I developed a deeper appreciation for the lives of urban youth. I often wondered how educators could incorporate hip hop into the classroom as an instrument to promote academic achievement. How



might teachers channel this phenomenon to advance Black youth. Over time, I developed a strong hunch that educators might need to better understand hip hop's significance among Black youth. Thus, the proposed research is my contribution to unpacking those complex issues.

### Research Quality

The quality of qualitative research involves ensuring that a study relates the experience of the phenomenon, or culture or discourse of insiders without each reader having to experience it (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Hence, there are research decisions and activities that improve a study's usefulness and credibility.

Glaser and Strauss (1999) talk about what they call a researchers "theoretical sensitivity." This is the researcher's skill and ability to do qualitative research. Is the researcher aware of the subtle meaning of data, do they have the insight to give meaning to data and the ability to know what is pertinent and what is not. Theoretical sensitivity comes from being immersed in the relevant literature, having personal experiences to look back on so that the researcher gains the confidence of the reader.

There are four criteria suggested for ascertaining qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985): credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. They argue that ensuring credibility is the most important factor in establishing trustworthiness. I include several provisions in my study to give confidence that I have accurately recorded the phenomena under scrutiny. Having the insights of from 10 to 15 participants allowed their corroborating one another's sense of the world (triangulation of sources) and gaining an "effective representation of the phenomenon being measured" (Schensul & LeCompte, 1999, p. 5). In addition, I wrote rich, thick descriptions throughout my study so that readers can understand the extent to which this study might relate to another situation. Having a peer review my research during the process will

serve as a check on interpretation of data. Member checking during the group interview also established the validity of my study, because it provided an opportunity to summarize preliminary findings and allow participants an opportunity to correct errors and misinterpretations, and deepen understandings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Prolonged engagement seems likely to be met, because I have done significant fieldwork reconnaissance, so have experiences that help me fit in (and not disrupt) the hip hop sites. Through negative case analysis, I have an opportunity to broaden and confirm patterns that emerge from my data analysis as I scrutinize patterns that do not support my data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

## CHAPTER 4:

## FINDINGS

## Introduction

Michael Brake (1993) distinguishes three elements which form youth culture: image, demeanor and argot. ‘Image’ is connected to style and accessories. ‘Demeanor’ is the attitude of subculture members to mainstream culture and ‘argot’ is the way to deliver the ways of youth culture. For the respondents, hip hop style emerged in the way they dressed, their personality and their language. Both male and female respondents agreed that it [style] means nothing without “attitude” and “the way you talk.” In fact, hip hop provided an all-encompassing way of life, as Jordin noted:

“It’s the way I dress. It’s the way I dance. It’s the way I talk. It’s the way I draw and paint. It’s in my attitude. It’s my life. I’m a total hip hop head. It’s become my persona” (Jordin, p. 1).

## Males Affiliating with Hip Hop

A description of the common themes expressed by the students follows, in particular, they describe hip hop cultural forms and uses of these forms, dominant messages of hip hop, and the personal significance of hip hop. Next, I present participants’ thoughts about school, why they attended, and student/teacher relationships. Finally, I describe the significance of their identity as it pertains to hip hop, schooling, and academic achievement. However, because differences in gender findings about school experiences and relationships with hip hop, findings are reported first for males, then for females.

Male and female participants in the study articulated three main themes related to their affiliation with hip hop. First, they were all exposed to the vastly marketable form of hip hop culture and enjoyed its numerous products. Second, they agreed that the dominant messages of hip hop were mostly negative, this appeared to have little bearing on their participation in the

culture. And third, hip hop mattered to them because of significance in their culture and more importantly in their personal identity, and belonging to peer groups – both influenced by popular youth culture. I take up each of these themes in turn.

#### “You Got it Tight”

Hip hop’s fashion sense carried a great deal of weight with the males. Moreover, fashion played a key role in marking hip hop insiders as insiders. When asked how one could visually identify someone who participates in the hip hop culture, male and female participants explained the complicated components of clothing worn by hip hop insiders. In particular, hip hop style was an all-encompassing look:

“Saggy pants, sneakers and some bling if you got it tight like that [put together well]. Oh, and big, oversized shirts. You can’t be wearing no tight shirts. And attitude. Gotta have attitude. Everything’s gotta flow. You know if you wanna get noticed” (D’Maris, p. 2).

“It [how I dress] meant a lot to me, it let other people know who I was when I walked down the halls. Everybody knew me” (Jordin, p. 2).

According to the male respondents, the hip hop dress code included wearing sagging baggy pants, mostly jeans, and large oversized tees [tee shirts] or Polo shirts. Nike and Air Force One gym shoes were the “in” brands to wear. Those individuals who sported gym shoes that were not authentic or had become dirty were ridiculed by their peers and labeled as “poor” and/or “dirty.” Timberlands and Lugs [boots] also met the hip hop fashion criteria for males when they attended school. Designers that they reported wearing included Sean John, Rocawear, Akademics, Ecko and Southpole, designers often designated as “urban” designers, design industry term for young and Black. Without a doubt, the style was labeled as hip hop and had been influenced by the music, videos, artists, media and peers.

Respondents’ fashion sense clearly indicated how they traversed in their surroundings. Responses such as “to get noticed,” “not to be lame,” and “it’s cool” were given when asked why

they dressed in hip hop style. Rayshawn expressed a personally conscious reason for wearing hip hop clothes when he said, “It’s who I am.” His older brother and most of his male relatives “dressed hip hop.” Wearing hip hop clothes was normal in his neighborhood. Nevertheless, the most conventional reason given for wearing hip hop clothing was to “be cool,” “fit in,” and “be popular.”

The focus group of male participants was also self-conscious about the cool factor. During their discussion male participants attempted to describe how clothes and being cool were crucial not only to their personal identity but peer groups. The male respondents conversed about the significance of cool and why they aspired to achieve that status:

Jamal: Cause you want to be the boss. You wanna get respect (p. 2).

Rayshawn: You didn’t wanna be a lame. Lames and nerds got beat up (p. 3).

Jordin: I wanted to look cool like everyone else (p. 2).

Being cool in school was important to Jamal, Rayshawn, and Jordin. They utilized their hip hop style as a facilitator in obtaining respect and becoming popular. Clothes and attitude were large parts of the façade of being “cool” for all the male respondents. This also resonated with James, “I didn’t used to dress cool ‘cause my mom didn’t have the money. I’d wear the Nikes but not the expensive ones. I wasn’t popular. But when I started to wear, like, the name brands and started getting into trouble in high school, people noticed me” (p. 3).

Rayshawn also linked the way he dressed to his popularity in school, “I always dress nice and keep my fade [haircut] lined up and lookin’ good and gotta have the cell [phone] in my pocket in case I get the digits [phone numbers]” (p. 4). His illustration acknowledged the popular hip hop styles and he believed that his wardrobe, appearance, and cell phone were valuable identity gauges, which made him cool.

The appearance of “cool” was extremely important to the males in my study. They

coupled cool to popular and respected. Jordin, a slim, dark-skinned male dressed in baggy jeans and an oversized white Polo shirt described himself as “cool” and said it was displayed by “the way I act and look” (p. 4). When asked to describe his behavior he replied, “I’m a bipolar masterpiece. I can be street or I can chill. It depends on the situation” (p. 4). His personality was somewhat “street” [rough, gangster] and it was apparent that his oversized clothes, tilted baseball cap, Cartier glasses and cocky disposition helped him impart that image. Jordin expounded on his perception of what it means to be “street.” He mentioned that he listened to hip hop since his early teens and praised his brothers for steering his appreciation of hip hop music and style.

Damien, sporting an oversized burgundy Polo shirt with an extra large white tee shirt underneath, was unmistakably influenced by hip hop style. He discussed how some rappers present an image not only with their appearance but also by rapping about prison life. He stated, “Most rappers never did time [prison], or even smoked a cigarette. But they be talkin’ ‘bout smokin’ blunts [marijuana], packin’ heat [carrying guns] and all that. They hype it up so people will buy their music” (p. 5). Even though Damien questioned the authenticity of some rappers, he perceived prison life as being cool, almost a rite of passage, and claimed, “...it’s the way it is in my hood, it’s about street creds [credibility]” (p. 6).

Being popular in school was also important to D’Maris. He agreed that wearing the “right” brand names aided in the perception of being cool. Clothes and attitude were large parts of the persona of being “cool” for D’Maris and most of the male respondents. Wearing hip hop clothes facilitated D’Maris’ inclusion into a popular group. Jonathan echoed, “I sagged my pants and wore tight [cool] clothes in school ‘cause it helped me fit in the popular group. Everybody wants to be popular. If you’re not [popular], you get teased and made fun of” (p. 3).

Hip hop clothes provided the males a social identity which was crucial to them despite

the school dress code. Sagging pants, do-rags, baseball caps and cell phones were not permitted in school, nevertheless these clothes and accessories were perfectly normal for the males. Being reprimanded daily for not complying with the dress code was a common occurrence. Detention was the only option for those who did not comply. Matthew concurred, “I always sagged my pants and didn’t think it was a big deal but the teachers did ‘cause they was always puttin’ me outta class for dumb stuff like my pants. Teachers were even trippin’ [overreacting] about pants saggin’ on the smart dudes. It was crazy” (p. 4).

All the male respondents agreed that conforming to their school environment was essential to becoming popular, and popular meant sporting the right “gear” [clothes]. Their social identity was important to them even if it meant opposing the school dress code. “It wasn’t a big deal,” Jamal boasted, “A teacher would put me out ‘cause of my pants or phone. I’d chill in the hall until the next class. The next teacher might put me out or not. Some of ‘em [teachers] were anal about it, some didn’t care. Either way I’d end up back in class.”

“The Swagga”

Being cool was an unwavering response with the males and achieving the façade of being “cool” was their ultimate goal. When asked to explain the concept of “cool” Matthew pulled his Black hood back and responded, “It’s about the swagga’ that let’s people know what’s up. Not just what you wearin’ but how you talk and walk. If you dress nice and be all lay back then you got swagga” (p. 5). The focus group discussion illustrates the significance of “swagga” and “cool” as it defined them personally and socially:

Damien: In school, you look around and size up [analyze] the cool kids, the fakes and the lames (p. 7).

Matthew: A lot of ‘em be perpin’ [perpetrating] like they cool or swag but everybody know whassup (p. 6).

Jonathan: You gotta act street even if don't hang in the street when it comes down to it. People gonna talk about you but it's how you play it off. If you down and got that swagga' nobody's gonna harass you (p. 6).

Damien: Yeah, dudes like to show out [show off] like they hard but you know when you look at somebody how they layin'. Nice clothes means a lot in the hood. They know you got money. They're either gonna be your friend or hate on you [jealous]. Flat out [straight up, certainly, or it's the truth] (p. 8).

Jonathan: Yeah. You gotta be cool and chill. That's what gets respect from the dudes and the ladies (p. 6).

Jonathan attributed his popularity in high school to his "tight wardrobe" and his swag with the girls. He also boasted about being the captain of the basketball team and believed that being an athlete kept him out of the streets, "I had some serious skills playin' ball and so I played and thought I was gonna make it to the NBA but my grades were bad. But it's all good. I was popular with the ladies" (p. 7).

Image was a priority in high school as opposed to academics. Matthew stated, "Nobody cared what the teachers thought 'cause they weren't down with the hood. Everybody cared what the students thought 'cause they were *from* the hood. You had to represent. Bottom line" (p. 5).

Students who were labeled "nerds" or "lames" did not fit in with the popular students but were favored by teachers and administrators. The "lames" and "nerds" were relentlessly ridiculed by their peers as a result of their appearance which included tucked-in shirts, ankle-length pants, and non-designer eyeglasses. The cool males clearly avoided these groups in school because they perceived that associating with either one would tarnish their image.

### Hip Hop Images

The most common images that the males found appealing included the hip hop artists' wardrobes, accessories, and overall wealth. Jamal was clearly influenced, "They all wear clothes and bling [jewelry] that everybody goes out and buys soon as they see the video, even the tats [tattoos]. I got six tats and can't wait to get the next one on my back. Maybe like Tupac had back



in the day. ‘Thug Life’ [tattoo] looked good on them videos” (p. 5).

Dreams of “livin’ large” (wealthy) was a common denominator among the males. Matthew enjoyed the images of the “fine ladies” that gravitate toward rap artists as a result of their wealth but was clearly more interested in the bigger picture, “They [rap artists] be rappin’ about the fine ladies and makin’ money and livin’ large and you know, gettin’ what’s yours. But hip hop is much bigger than that” (p. 4).

### Hip Hop’s Dominant Messages

“...from war to making love. It introduces you to a lot of different aspects in life. You know, violence or peace, being humble or materialistic. It all depends on what type of rap you listen to” (Matthew, p. 2).

For some Hip Hop is a culture, for others Hip Hop is music, and yet for others it is fashion. However, for the males in my study, it delved more into the spirit. D’Maris’ explained, “It’s a way of someone expressing their feelings, how they feel, how they see others, how they see society, how they see the world, how they see themselves. Hip hop brings out that emotion in people and in turn gives you power” (p. 2). Rayshawn echoed, “It’s a way of living...it’s an inner thing. It’s something you feel. It’s a spiritual thing” (p. 3).

The males agreed that hip hop is also something that is felt within the human spirit albeit its commercialized component. They also agreed that the messages can be both positive and negative depending on one’s perspective. Nonetheless, the most dominant message discussed was that of economic empowerment:

Jamal: Yeah, these dudes [rap artists] were livin’ in the ‘hood tryin’ to get by (p. 5).

Rayshawn: Like Jay Z who sold drugs in his ‘hood to get by. He wasn’t educated or nothin’ then started rappin’ and sold his demos outta’ the trunk of his car (p. 6).

Jordin: Yeah and people liked his lyrics ‘cause he was keepin’ it real. You know spittin’ [rapping] about stuff that went on in his ‘hood. Then you got the other dude. What’s his

name? Oh, yeah. Kanye. He didn't grow up in the 'hood and he went to college. He's a pretty boy (p. 5).

Jamal: Yeah, but his lyrics are straight. He still makin' more money then he would with a college degree. His first cut was called 'College Dropout' and he made a lot of money on that. My man can rap. He's at another level. Everybody can spit about their own thing (p. 4).

Rayshawn: Yeah, long as they ain't fake. People know what's up when you listenin' to someone's rhymes and later it comes out that you never did this or that (p. 6).

Jamal: Either way, these dudes are makin' money and laughin' all the way to the bank. It's about makin' that money and once you got that you gone get everything else (p. 7).

Jordin: Yeah, look at 50 Cent. Shot up nine times, sold crack. Eminem picks him up on his label, he cuts out a few albums, sells some Vitamin Water, sells it to Coke or Pepsi or whoever. Everybody knows who 50 Cent is not 'cause of his rap skills but 'cause of his business dealings. All them suits [businessmen] are probably shakin' their heads hatin' [jealous, envy] on him" (p. 5).

Rap music was relevant to the male respondents and conveyed a positive message of economic empowerment. Regardless of their preference of rap artists, they believed that many of the rappers' rhymes were authentic and sent significant messages to their audiences, most notably messages about economic empowerment.

The males found rap aesthetically pleasing because of its clever and poetic wordplay, cultural references and commentary on life. They associated with the rapper, the lyrics and the overall message. It was about the streets. It was about respect. It was about being Black.

#### Hip Hop and Black Pride for Males

"Hip hop started out as a 'Black thing' ya' know and I take pride in that whether it's positive or negative. I prefer to look at the positive. It's a large part of my culture and my identity and I think, a large part for the majority of young Black people..." (Matthew, p. 5).

"It [hip hop] matters because it's who I am as a Black man. It matters because a person of color began the movement. It matters because it tells a story. It matters because it gives a voice to the voiceless. It matters because it's a source of empowerment" (D'Maris, p. 3).

Hip hop creates and reflects Black identity. Rap artists including Nas, Talib Kweli,

Scarface, and Arrested Development, to name a few, rap explicitly about their identities as African Americans, highlighting both the struggles and triumphs that Blacks, as a community have experienced. In the same way that racial identity theorists examine the ways in which one makes sense of themselves as a “racial” being, a hip hop identity allows one to investigate and makes sense of attitudes having to do with being a “hip hop head.”

All the male respondents in the study agreed that a large part of their identity would collapse if they didn't participate in hip hop:

Rayshawn: I grew up listening to rap and dressing the way I do. If it all disappeared what would I be? That's all I've known.

Jordin: To ask what would be lost if I didn't participate in hip hop is like asking me how would I write if I lost my hands?

Jamal: Yeah, and like Shawn said, 'that's all I know.' I'd be lost 'cause it's a part of me.

Jordin: Right, right. There's no other kind of music I really wanna listen to or dress like. I'm not gone listen to country or that crazy white boy music. That music doesn't rep [represent] me.

Rayshawn: True dat. The only connect for me is in rap. For real.

Hip hop culture evidently informed the identity development of the males in the study. Each respondent appropriated certain elements of hip hop to fit their own circumstances and persona. It defined them as African American males and shadowed them everywhere, including school.

### Males in School

“It was ‘aight, [alright] I guess. I mean, I had to go even though it was really boring, but my friends hyped it up” (Jamal, p. 8).

“I didn't like school. It was dull. The teachers got on my last nerve and there were too many rules. Seeing my friends there made it easier” (Jordin, p. 7).

“...I was pretty smart and knew it. The teachers liked me because I was smart” (Matthew, p. 6).

The male participants shared similar attitudes about school. They viewed an education as

a necessity even though they didn't enjoy attending school, especially high school. There was an evident detachment in their affirmed values of education and their actions. The majority of males agreed that school was "boring" and teachers were "annoying" and "talked too much." During their K-12 schooling, they valued education as an ideal but were displeased by it as a reality. Some of the males felt that the subjects were too difficult, more so because the information wasn't presented in a stimulating manner.

Many male respondents enjoyed spending time with their friends in school, because they didn't always have an opportunity to visit with them outside of school. School was their social meeting place and their peer groups were critical to their social identity and survival.

The males concurred about the importance of an education as aiding in a successful future. They perceived themselves as fairly average students. Two of the seven males interviewed currently attend a college or university. One of the five remaining males hopes to attend community college in two years and the other four are self employed and expressed no interest in attending college or university. The academic identities expressed by the males were both positive and negative. Most of them viewed themselves as fairly average students and expressed the importance of getting an education even though they viewed school as extremely boring and occasionally partook in forms of intentional and/or unintentional resistance. They sanctioned the value of education, yet justified behaviors that did not support learning in the classroom. Jamal described a situation where a former high school teacher disrespected him. "I walked into class late and she starts trippin' 'cause I didn't bring a pass and had a do-rag on my head. So I leave out and she gets up in my face and starts yellin' at me like she's crazy. You don't get up in somebody's face like that. I don't care who you are" (p. 7). Jamal didn't perceive himself as a very good student and struggled academically attributing his lack of academic

achievement to boredom and difficult subjects.

#### Street vs. School

“...It was a game of survival going to school and getting home. If you weren’t tough you had to perp like you were. You had to be street smart” (DaMaris, p. 5).

This “street knowledge” is esteemed. It is at stake in every interaction and those who reside in the streets are taught to rise to the occasion, especially with strangers. For people who live outside the inner city and lack understandings about the street code, this conflict with respect in the most common interactions can be terrifying and inconceivable. But for those who abide by the code, the clear objective of their demeanor is to dissuade strangers from even thinking about testing their manhood, and the sense of power that comes with the ability to intimidate others can be alluring even to those who know the code without being heavily invested in it – the decent inner-city youths (Anderson, 1999).

#### Academic Identity

How the males perceived themselves academically also depended on the teacher. Damien described himself as a below average student in many of his high school classes except in History and Science. “In 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade I used to get B’s in History and Science. I had a couple hype [stimulating, exciting] teachers. They weren’t boring and they didn’t sweat a brotha’ over his pants, you know, dumb stuff” (p. 6). The majority of males in the study shared similar responses when asked why they may have earned passing or failing grades. But, their responses clearly indicate that a positive rapport with teachers and administrators may have had some influence on better grades. “Some teachers looked at you like you was a gang-banger ‘cause how you dressed and talked. If you didn’t talk proper they looked down on you and they’d always blame you if somethin’ went down in class. You’d get put out first” (Damien, p. 8).

The media often portrays young, Black youth dressed in hip hop attire, as thugs or

criminals and this stereotype spilled into classroom settings where some educators may lump the decent kids into the same category as the street kids and misjudge them. The decent students learned how to code-switch and often mimic those from the street, behaving in ways that often baffle teachers. Consequently, many teachers are unable to make a distinction between the two groups. Inundated by clothes, the attitude or the swagger, they cannot detect the introverted student underneath, which may be why teachers categorize the majority of students as “street” (Anderson, 1999). The impact on schooling is different expectations, treatment and experiences of “decent” vs. “street.”

### Female Respondents

Young women respondents detailed the ways that being women set up choices that men did not have to make, especially relative to the imagery projected in commercialized hip hop. In what follows, listen as respondents discuss implications for dress, hair-dos, and social relationships in schools,

#### Dressing Classy, Not Provocative

“...Tight pants and weaves for girls with some high pumps, you know, heels and some nice jewelry. The hair’s gotta be done right. The whole look has to be right” (Brintley, p. 2).

“I like the hoodies and big hoop earrings and designer tees. I don’t have to wear what they all wearin’. I wear what I like” (Nicole, p. 3).

Most of the female respondents preferred a more individualist style. They pulled what they liked from hip hop and incorporated it into their own look. During interviews most of the females sported tight jeans and graphic tees with sneakers as opposed to stilettos. All of the females wore large or extra large hoop earrings and a weave or small hair extension.

Unlike their male counterparts, the females claimed that they were not influenced by the images of women in the rap videos or films. Women participants appeared disgusted by many of

the scantily clad women who appeared in most of the rap artists' videos. "Ain't nobody gonna try to look like them hoers on those videos. They use strippers and porn stars for that 'cause a good girl ain't gonna dress like that," Jamie argued (p. 7). T'Lajah echoed, "If I dressed like that my momma would put me outta' the house. I couldn't even try to dress like that to school" (p. 8).

The image portrayed by Beyonce was the style of choice by most of the females. Her long, silky, flowing hair, well maintained figure, flawless complexion and of "girl next door" persona is what the female participants aspired to.

"Beyonce's got it all. She can sing, dance, she's beautiful, and she's classy. You gotta like her. She's got that good girl image even when she dresses sexy. She doesn't go over the top and none of her songs are explicit," Courtney stated (p. 6).

The amount of skin exposed was a serious topic with the females and it appeared to influence their relationships with parents, teachers and peers.

Contrary to the males in the study the females emphasized distinctiveness and self-expression as contributing factors for their fashion sense:

Brintley: I like the styles and clothes and all and of course, use the slang, but I'm kind of my own person and if I don't like a style I'm not going to let it influence me. I like to keep my own hair and like to wear skirts and lacy stuff, too (p. 3).

Midori: ...there is a mainstream look associated with hip hop. This could be (but not limited to) larger clothing, lots of jewelry and sneakers. I dress according to my mood" (p. 2).

Jamie: I wear what's comfortable. I do like some of the styles out there but I'm not going to wear something just because everybody else is wearing it. I do me (p. 3).

The female respondents embraced the concept of individuality yet expressed concern about their appearance and were willing to conform in certain situations. Midori, a full time college student and part time deejay clearly understood how women in hip hop are portrayed as sex objects.

"I know what it's about and I see it every day and yeah, it offends me but I don't let it get to me because I don't get caught up in all the hype. Tryin' to be cool is more for the guys. Females, I think, try to look cute more than cool and what makes them cute is their gear but mostly their hair" (p. 9).

In fact, during interviews most of the females sported hip hop gear that included hoodies, tight jeans, pumps, sneakers, graphic tees or large hoop earrings, but they talked about their hair and the importance of achieving a desired look with “the weave.”

### The Weave

Hair has long been for African American women a painful issue when you take into account the ordeals many Black women go through to manage “nappy” hair, whether through relaxers, weaves, or extensions. Black women’s hair is one of the most vulnerable characteristics of their bodies, because it lies contrary to the criteria used to define beauty in this country. Dyson (2009) argued that some African Americans have psychologically engaged a poisonous self-loathing by ridiculing Black women who prefer a natural hairstyle. Thus, it was no surprise that hair played prominently in women’s comments.

“If you didn’t have your hair done in school everybody would be calling you ‘nappy-headed.’ Some girls came in with sweet weaves that their sister or cousin did and everybody wanted to get it done like that” (Courtney, p. 6).

“It was important to look cute. Girls who had nappy hair or wore old clothes weren’t popular, even if they were cute. It’s about them weaves. You had to have it all packaged right” (Nicole, p. 5).

Hair was an extremely important accessory to the females. “Having ‘good’ hair [long, silky] is envied by Black women,” according to Jamie, “and we get it by wearing weaves [hair extensions] (p. 6). This resonated with T’Lajah, “You never see any Black girls on the rap videos with nappy hair. They dress like hoes but they got nice weaves” (p. 7).

When asked about “hoes,” the female respondents defined them as women who dress provocatively and have sex with different men, similar to prostitutes. All the female respondents agreed that female rap artists and those who dance in rap videos did not influence the way they dress. They were influenced by some hip hop attire, but not the attire worn by video groupies.

Tykesse stated, “I wear heels and tight jeans to the clubs but when I see a female dressin’ like a



hoe I know she's gonna be the first one actin' fake and complaining about dudes disrespecting her. But she's the one dressing to be disrespected" (p. 6). Ultimately, women faced a different set of challenges than men – associating with the look of women in hip hop media was the wrong sort of woman. Being authentic versus a sellout played a central role for women.

#### Authentic vs. Sellout

Being authentic versus a sellout played a central role for women. The root of hip hop is connected to the ghetto whether or not many of its artists grew up there. Here, the view of authenticity seems to argue that unless you've lived it, you can't write, sing or rap it.

"... it's about keepin' it real like being who you are and not bein' fake. Nobody likes people who are fake and think they all that..." (Courtney, p. 2).

"...The most important message that hip hop gives is the message of authenticity. Whether it is an intellectual hip hop artist rapping about sociopolitical issues that he/she faces or an artist that comes from an impoverished city ghetto and struggles to feed his family... it is important that the messages they convey are authentic...Nobody likes a sellout" (Midori, p. 2).

In a way, arguments over authenticity in hip hop relate to hip hop's strength in selling a story, in marketing itself as a specific kind of narrative art, and hip hop ultimately implies that, if you "ain't" poor and Black, you "ain't" authentic. Many people in the ghetto do not romanticize the ghetto because they are trying to leave it. So the ghetto itself and its physical geography is not being romanticized in hip hop. Instead, hip hop celebrates the intellectual attachment and familiarity that "ghetto" generates, a bond among those who suffer and struggle together, but who long to leave dreadful boundaries and imposed limitations.

Hence, "ghetto" serves as a principle of expression, and the logic of ghetto – or at least the logic of legitimating ghetto in rap discourse – depends on understanding the complex and contradictory interests of the people who live there (Dyson, 2007). Famous rappers observe life and they rap about their observations on life. If they have not lived ghetto, they can make you

believe they have.

However, the female respondents failed to buy into that dynamic. They insisted that rappers “keep it real,” or risk losing their audience. Rap music was relevant to the female respondents because it conveyed a positive message of authenticity, a connectedness around “ghetto” that centered Black urban life. Women participants considered most of the rappers’ rhymes authentic, because they sent significant messages to their audiences about “keepin’ it real” by being comfortable with yourself, especially in a society that devalues Black life.

### Hip Hop and Blackness

Thus, hip hop told a story about Black life. Nicole defined hip hop, more specifically rap music, as telling a story. Other respondents also built on the story theme of rap. For them rap lyrics told stories of people’s lives, stories which may reveal negative information about the realities of the ghetto, hustling and thug life. Jamie defined hip hop as a distinct form of cultural expression. Hence, rap music provided many of the truths for her, “if you sit back and listen to it” (p. 7). She also confirmed that everything that Tupac rapped about dealt with “truth and knowledge,” which is what she sought as a proud African American woman.

Furthermore, Midori described the “tightest,” or most skilled, rappers and how they shared daring stories about the police, and other aspects of life and death in the ghetto. She explained how rap lyrics have multiple meanings and could be used differently in various contexts. Rap music served as a powerful and larger cultural framework for comprehending respondents’ lives. Part of their understandings included the transmission of significant cultural messages and other types of bulletins that informed them how to deal with their daily lives. Thus, some female respondents made references to rap music as the news, a very significant analogy. For these young women “news,” in this usage, meant a source of regular information for these

provided by members of their own race who were close in age.

When asked how they would feel if they no longer participated in hip hop, the female respondents in the focus group defended the centrality of hip hop to their identity in their community:

Midori: If I didn't participate in hip hop I would lose a lot of meaning in who I am as a person. It really does help define who I am and plays a big part. I think I would lose my identity (p. 3).

T'Lajah: It's totally who I am. It defines my Blackness. It's a huge part of my identity (p. 4).

Courtney: God. I can't even imagine not being a part of hip hop. It's who I am. For real (p. 4).

Jamie: Hip hop started in the hood. Black folks started the whole culture with the music and graffiti and clothes and all that. That makes you proud. I mean, now the whole world listens to rap (p. 5).

Courtney: Yeah, it's just like anything else. If that's all you know, that's all you know. It becomes a part of you (p. 5).

T'Lajah: Right, right. I was dancin' to the beats since I was a baby and remember listening to the rap that my daddy was listenin' to. You're right. It's all you know (p. 5).

Courtney: It's such a huge part of me like speaking another language. How do you stop speaking another language? Same thing. You don't because you've only known that you're whole life. So, where would you be without it? Lost (p. 5).

Ultimately, most of the female respondents in the study indicated that a large part of their identity was tied to hip hop culture. They did believe that hip hop culture, as a whole, authenticated their identity, even though most of them agreed that clothing worn by female hip hop artists or video models did not directly influence their fashion sense.

As with the males, young women respondents understood and used hip hop as a vehicle to combat oppression and to transmit strong positive cultural messages of Black pride. In a similar fashion reported for Glasgow (1981) suggested, hip hop served as a tool of resilience against an oppressive society for an "underclass" young urban poor males.

### “Too Short, Too Tight”

As had been the case for men respondents, women reported how school policies and staff reacted to clothing choices that resonated with hip hop culture.

“When it used to be hot in school I’d get mad because our shorts had to be knee length and what’s the point of wearing shorts to our knees? That’s for guys. We couldn’t wear beaters or tanks, either. We were sweating like crazy. All we’d ever hear was ‘it’s too short’ or ‘it’s too tight’” (Midori, p. 4).

Jamie complained about the inconsistent enforcement of the dress code, “If I wore a beater [ribbed tank top] some of my teachers would send me to the office. The others were cool with it. They didn’t police everything. And it’s not like it was a low cut beater. If one of the straight A girls wore it, they wouldn’t say anything. When I wore it, they’d flip out” (p. 6).

The females were opposed to certain parts of the dress code, especially if it pertained to them. T’Lajah agreed that “showing too much skin is a distraction” (p. 7), yet she believed that the dress code was unfair. Brintley laughed when she stated, “It didn’t matter what you wore in high school. The boys would still walk by and rub up against you. That’s just what they did” (p. 5).

The school dress code itself was viewed as an obstacle for the women, but implementing it impartially was of paramount concern for the respondents. It was clear to them that certain students were not penalized for violating the dress code while the majority was required to comply. The (female) respondents said little about these students but implied that the smart and well-behaved students were favored and their occasional inappropriate attire was often ignored.

Jamie: When I’d walk into class with a belly shirt on underneath my hoodie the teachers put me out but if Ms. 4.0 came in and had her belly button showing they’d pretend like they didn’t see it.

Midori: True. I was the 4.0 at my school. I didn’t usually wear clothes that showed a lot

of skin but when I did, once in a while, none of the teachers ever said anything to me. They liked me because I was smart and didn't act ghetto so I think they let me get away with stuff.

Brintley: It really didn't affect me that much because I didn't wear a lot of clothes that showed a lot of skin. But you knew who the teachers favored 'cause no matter what they did teachers never gave them a hard time.

Midori: I don't like to say it, but if the teacher liked you, you were straight. I didn't have any problems with teachers. I stayed outta' the line of fire.

The school dress code was the most challenged rule in school, according to the female respondents, and monitoring students' gear presented a constant challenge. "You'd be walkin' down the hall passing all these teachers and nobody sayin' nothin'. Then, all of a sudden, the ones who you can't stand walk up on you and tell you to go to the office because your shirt is too tight or too low. I used to tell them, 'I can't help it if God gave me all of this'" (p. 7). Tykese chuckled as she pointed one finger to her chest and the other to her backside. "I mean really, if a skinny, flat-chest girl with no booty wore a tight low shirt or tight pants it was cool but if I wore it then all hell broke loose. I can't help what my momma gave me" (p. 7).

Most of the females agreed that teachers and administrators not only spent too much time policing students' attire but more importantly, unfairly enforced the policies by favoring certain students and/or groups. Moreover, they felt that policing students' clothing was a waste of time because students were fully aware that the ramifications never amounted to much. Consequently, it created a great deal of resentment from students that only contributed to strained relationships between teachers and students.

The female respondents conveyed a perceptive analysis of the school dress code when they insinuated that their attire was constrained and monitored as a means of managing the conduct of the males. But women found their clothing restrictions absurd and pointless, because what women wore seemed to have no influence on men's inappropriate behaviors toward women. They deemed the dress code unsuccessful and wrong-headed because they viewed the

male's sexual conduct as far worse an offense, and it seemed ordinary and not subject to reprimand.

#### Female/Female and Female/Teacher Relationships

Women participants believed that students who behaved and did their work tended to be favored by most of their teachers. For instance:

“In high school I did really well in some of my classes and terrible in other classes and some of the teachers trippin’ all the time didn’t help things. They really got on my last nerve. Maybe I was just hard headed.” (Tykese, p. 8).

“You have teachers who actually want to teach. You know, the one where you actually learn something? Then you have the teachers who are tired and aggravated and just let students sit there and don’t do anything... Teachers didn’t understand us.” (Brintley, p. 6).

Significantly, and in contrast to men's narratives, none of the females indicated that teachers ascribed identities to them based on race or gender. They did not attribute any treatment by teachers as being based on their style of dress unless it violated the school dress code.

Fighting and “he-said, she-said” confrontations between groups of girls in school - what students meant by the word “drama” - strained positive relationships with teachers. T’Lajah, a tall, thin caramel-skinned female stated, “There was always some kind of drama in school. Girls were always startin’ something, usually about a boy or how another girl looked. They be always hatin’ on somebody especially if they acted all bourgeois [better than anyone else]” (p. 6). The term bourgeois was a common response amongst many of the females who didn’t belong to the bourgeois group. The bourgeois girls perceived themselves as “normal” with those outside of their group as adversaries.

“Once you got in a fight, and it didn’t matter if you started it or not, teachers would look at you like you the bad one even if you did it to defend yourself, “ stated Brintley. “Now all of a sudden teachers look down on you. They didn’t understand. They just cared about you getting A’s. The streets don’t care about no A’s.”

Jamie elaborated on the drama that was commonplace when she attended high school. “Girls

used to always start mess with me in school. I wasn't fast or nothin' like that." When asked why other girls bullied her, she responded, "Because they were haters. I guess I dressed nicer than they did and always had my hair done and 'cause the boys liked me. One minute they'd wanna fight, the next they wanna be your friend" (p. 6).

Along with drama, physically fighting existed among the girls. Most of the females explained that fighting was used to establish street creds as well as friendships and social identity in the school. Once you demonstrated that you had fighting skills, bullies wouldn't attempt to provoke an argument with you. Backing down in the 'hood' was not part of the "cred" code, but viewed as weak and unacceptable.

And, in a revealing commentary on their lives, females disliked the fighting and drama that occurred between the females more than other aspects about school. And, these women participants disliked being negatively judged by their teachers, especially teachers' lack of understanding about the daily struggles of inner-city youth. Thus, violence existed in girl groups and between men. Female violence played out in school, in a way analogous to the males' pressures of maintaining a tough image. But, males said little about fights that occurred in school, implying that many of their conflicts were handled in their neighborhoods.

Often, what is out on the streets is brought into the classrooms. To avoid feeling bad, some students lift themselves up by putting others down, creating drama. However, the trophies to be won are not of an academic kind, rather they are those of the street, particularly respect. As they campaign for respect, students must be prepared not only to fight, but also to take care with their appearance. Esteem is so uncertain that it can be taken away with just a word, and kids are constantly challenged to defend what they have. Decent students imitate street ones, behaving in street ways that often confuse teachers, because many teachers cannot differentiate between the

two groups (Anderson, 1999). What follows, thus, summarizes the most significant findings that emerged in this study in the areas of academic identity, hip hop and identity formation, and hip hop and schooling.

### Summary

Ultimately, female respondents viewed themselves academically in similar ways. Most believed they were average students and had a positive academic identity, while having failing grades. To their way of thinking, having inconsistent grades and reluctance to do homework did not constitute a bad academic identity. Tykese reflected, “I guess I was a pretty good, student even though I talked a lot, but I wasn’t disruptive. It was on the down low” (p. 6). For Tykese and the other females, good citizenship translated into what was perceived as a good student, independent of grades.

As was the case for males, school was viewed as boring and teachers were annoying. Yet, every female interviewed either currently attends college or has plans of attending college or some form of continued education. This profound disconnect that school was essential for future success in life contrasted to their daily schooling practices of doing homework but classroom misbehaving, echoed throughout the study.

Hip hop culture unmistakably informed the personal and group identity development of male and female respondents. Participants dressed in hip hop clothes, assumed the persona and utilized hip hop slang on a daily basis. How they incorporated hip hop into their lives was multifaceted and personal. The influence of hip hop to their identities also provided an intricate course of action.

Male respondents embraced hip hop culture. They mimicked the style of hip hop artists and took cues from the subculture to help establish their “cool” personas. They professed that



their identities were improved by their cool image as they attempted to demonstrate that image. The males believed that they obtained respect from their peers as a result of their image. The participants acted in response to their school environment and were primarily concerned with obtaining popularity within the school.

The males adopted certain behaviors in hip hop and, even though they enjoyed listening to “thuggish” rap they did not profess to be thugs. The females disassociated themselves overwhelmingly, from the sexual images of the women in hip hop, but at the same time still participated in the culture. Though female respondents occasionally wore suggestive clothes that challenged the school dress codes, they strongly rejected the video ‘hoe’ persona.

Hip hop also provided respondents’ with friends and group identities. Both male and female personal style provided them with a sense of belonging in school. The males perceived their identities as being cool and popular as a result of their attire. They also believed that their way of dress influenced their academic identities albeit being cool was more important to them than being perceived as being smart.

Ultimately, identity was one of the factors that led to student disengagement from schooling. In this sense, the respondents believed that, if they were given an opportunity to engage their multiple identities within the classroom, they might connect more to schooling. Clearly, Crooks and Dei et al. both make strong cases with regards to the need to incorporate identity in classroom learning.

In school systems, the pattern was similar. Students were aware of a mismatch between how themselves and how schools thought of them, may be more likely to resist whether in disengaging themselves from schooling or dropping out, or pursuing other avenues because the politics of hip hop arouses thought in youth, and its anti-oppressive theme cannot be separated

from the identity of the one who relates to the culture. For this reason, hip hop identities often present challenges in educational setting.

The creative way that males flaunted their persona and dress was perceived as a threat to teachers and administrators. The males' outward appearance and "thuggish" behaviors influenced how teachers reacted to them often labeling them as "criminal." Many respondents believed that they were often singled out and discriminated against by school staff. Most importantly, respondents agreed that teachers/administrators lacked the understanding of hip hop culture and the streets to make an earnest attempt to build a rapport necessary to impact academic achievement.

## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Study participants spoke volumes about the ways that hip hop culture informed their lives, especially connecting them with a Black, urban way of life and providing ways to express individualities consonant with hip hop culture. And, their sense of themselves did not stop at the schoolhouse door, but flowed into it. However, the way of life that their schools sponsored, encouraged, and enforced used hop hop markers of affiliation, especially clothing choices, as a way to mete out discipline and to mark certain students as not *serious* students, but troublemakers. In what follows, parallels between the present study and earlier research emerge relative to hip culture, Black identity, schooling, and the three taken together, and the section ends with a discussion about bridging hip hop culture and school culture.

### Hip Hop Culture

Hip hop culture has become an integral part of the lives of millions of African American youth, and the centrality of hip hop culture emerged for both the male and female respondents in this study, though the ways in which men took up hip hop differed in dramatic ways from that of young women. As reported in the literature, especially for young African American men, Black youth turned to hip hop to build values and individuality within an urban, African American way of life (Dyson, 1994; George 1999; Kitwana, 2002; Rose, 1994).

Clearly, for men study participants, rap music addressed the complex realities of urban life, what they heard in hip hop matched how they perceived their urban, “street” world. Men demonstrated being keen observers of hip hop culture, people able to scrutinize rap lyrics in depth (a mode of discourse some respondents termed lyrical poetry). As such findings from the current study are reminiscent of earlier work from Morrell and Duncan-Andrade (2002) whose

participants found rap music a poetic, literary style through ethnographic studies portraying rap as poetry, rooted in the racialization of poverty in American ghettos (Dyson, 2007).

Also, affiliating with hip hop provided a wide range of markers made evident in what young men chose to wear, how they wore it, and how they made sense of choices about presentations of self for others. Hip hop “style” aligned with being “respectable,” or popular, in peer culture. Men’s identifying with rap messages seemed to encapsulate their own lived experiences, especially those associated with day-to-day contestations to garner respect, their need to be ready to fight for respect, and their use of a particular sort of “patter” to make the point that they deserved respect (points consonant with Anderson, 1999).

The findings also corroborate studies that suggest Black youth do not all engage in, or define, hip hop culture in the same ways (Kitwana, 2002; George, 1999; Dyson, 2007). While young men respondents mirrored hip hop style, dress, and persona, young women participants clearly did not. Hip hop’s presentation of women fell outside the range of depictions of womanhood deemed “respectable” in their communities, and this impinged not only on how women chose to dress, but also on to what extent young women accepted hip hop lyrics as relevant to their lives. As to dress, female respondents strongly opposed the way rap videos portrayed females as scantily clad “hoes.” Instead, they appropriated hip hop images to fit their own personality and distanced themselves from the more provocative images. Here, “respect” affiliated with young women in an urban, “street” community was a particularly woman-identified issue: the age-old dilemma of being “nice” or being “loose” (promiscuous). Young women preferred female rappers and/or male artists who spoke to them about love and male/female relationships, as opposed to themes geared toward violence and misogyny. Young women seemed less knowledgeable as the male respondents about rap music in general,

especially about male-identified contestations for respect, and the artists or the lyrics, yet thoroughly enjoyed the genre. The sharp distinction seen between women and men in the findings reported from the present study, and having less said about women in earlier scholars, suggests a need for additional research into young women and hip hop culture.

### Black Identity

Identity was one component found to have considerable influence on student success. In this sense, respondents maintained that when they were provided the opportunity to engage their multiple identities within the classroom, through for instance, pursuing their interests, they were more inclined to connect with school.

The male respondents embraced hip hop style, dress, and other presentations of hip hop self. They took up suitable African American masculine personas—the complex interconnections among dress, footwear, bling, flow, attitude, acting tough, being cool—from their favorite artists to assist them in defining what it means to be a Black man in an urban community. Thus, men respondents seemed more to fully adopt (than women) hip hop style as represented in hip hop culture, especially from images made available in live, audio, and video performances. Young men participants projected their emerging Black personas first by displaying cool and tough façades in school to achieve their goals of gaining respect from their peers, and second by policing what counted as worthy of respect, such as commenting on how others looked and critiquing choices about clothing and footwear, and its condition.

Respondents were highly skilled at “code-switching” between ‘street’ and ‘decent’ behaviors. The males claimed they could portray the tough Black man from the streets then switch to a more acceptable (to school officials) well-mannered, respectful young Black man, depending on the situation. Anderson (1999) found Black men’s social identity (how they fit

themselves into a larger group of friends and acquaintances) and personal identities (how they presented themselves to others) often constructed carefully to assume preferred mannerisms, while simultaneously to shun those aspects perceived as unfavorable. For instance, men participants did not own up to being thugs or tough guys, but chose to distance themselves from harmful depictions. In a similar fashion, females removed themselves from the hip hop groupie ('hoe) image. Though female respondents enjoyed hip hop music, they separated themselves from the highly sexualized portrayals of the women in hip hop lyrics and videos. Many females wore hip hop attire that repeatedly tested the school dress codes, but did not adopt the clothing or makeup interpreted as indicating they might be promiscuous. Nevertheless, women participants made their own fashion statements, portions of which affirmed hip hop affiliations (beaters, showing midriff), while snubbing the 'hoe persona.

Ultimately, hip hop culture and its influence on style, played a central role in friendships and social identities. Hip hop style provided an avenue by which respondents could signal hip hop affiliation and feel included not only in their peer group but also a sense of belonging in their school environment. Respondents considered themselves popular as a result of their style. Overall, though achieving popularity was more important to the males than academic achievement, men participants nonetheless did okay in school.

### Schooling

Overall, findings illustrate that respondents committed to both school and hip hop culture. While most of the respondents complained that school was “boring” and teachers were “annoying,” they preferred to be in school with their friends and viewed themselves as good students. However, because their affiliations with hip hop failed to gain acceptance from school officials (teachers, administrators, security personnel), respondents often felt disrespected by

teachers and administrators, even discriminated against, because of their hip hop style and mannerisms.

Young men believed many teachers considered youth threats and therefore treated them unfairly. Respondents did not feel academically challenged and frequently sought ways to invigorate boring classrooms, and this led to some disfavored students' being identified as "thuggish" by their teachers. Respondents' insights support studies that take aim at unfair treatment of students as a result of cultural differences (Anderson, 1999; Dyson, 2007; Kitwana, 2002). In the present study, participants' affiliations with hip hop culture were at odds with most teachers and administrators' middle-class "school excellence" values. While many teachers and administrators were themselves African American, generationally they likely differed in important ways from youth. First, many align with an earlier Civil Rights era notion of Black identity, one that sought acceptance in historically and predominantly white institutions like schooling. Second, many affiliated more with Anderson's "decent" side of the street-decent spectrum. Third, while many lived in an earlier time in the same urban core, life there has changed for the worse and many teachers and administrators have used middle-class incomes to support not only upward mobility, but also distance from neighborhoods where youth now live.

The findings also reveal less discrimination toward female students compared to males. Females who wore provocative hip hop attire received reprimands for defying dress codes, primarily for exposing too much skin. But, young women seldom heard themselves stereotyped because of their clothing choices, as had been the case for young men. For the most part, no one thought of young women as a threat. But, at times teachers favored young women students thought of as smarter, turning a blind eye when they violated the dress code. Overall, gender difference findings suggest the continued importance of accounting for gender in studies about

schooling. Scholarship is emerging about young women and hip hop including Hutchinson, 1999; Morgan, 2000; Pough, 2004; Stephens, Few, 2007; Morgan, 2000. This topic suggests future research emerging from this study.

Overall, though they affiliated with hip hop culture and this affiliation was at odds with the accepted way of life in their schools, most of the participants claimed that they “did okay” in school, and many had attended college at the time of data collection.

### Hip Hop, Black Identity, and Schooling

The current study found (as did Roach, 2004, and Ginwright, 2004) that participants intertwined hip hop, identity, and schooling. Here, young adults—who had attended urban, predominantly African American high schools only a few years before—articulated myriad ways hip hop was made evident in how students dressed, interacted, and affiliated with others in schools, as well as spoke volumes about how school staff understood these students’ presentations of self, culture, and ultimately their position in the school order. Rather than accepting these as cultural affiliations that would prove useful for teachers to bridge school and out-of-school worlds, overwhelmingly schools used these markers of affiliation to discipline students, to indicate which students did not live up to school expectations. In the rare case, when an educator acknowledged such a cultural affiliation, rather than used it to discipline, students felt more at home in school and more connected to such an educator. This underscores the need for educators to acknowledge students’ hip hop identities as an aspect of building positive student/teacher relationships. Rather than viewing hip hop as a tool to challenge racial oppression (such as in Sampson, 2004), participants understood hip hop culture as more about the pool of resources from which they constructed a sense of themselves in the context of being Black and living in an urban area. The present study did not investigate how hip hop might have



been used to do more in schools than discipline students, but the interconnections found among hip hop, identity, and schooling suggest that bringing hip hop culture into the classroom would more likely provide a culture-affirming approach that would deepen students' affiliations with schools, than an abandonment of educational standards (Gay, 1994; Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005).

Furthermore, my findings contest theories that imply African American youth are opposed to the notion of schooling. Fordham and Ogbu (1986) suggested that Black youth oppose “white” schooling, an opposition that stems from discriminatory practices in this country. Yet, there was no evidence in the current study to suggest opposition to “white” schooling. Quite the contrary, males and females underscored that they were rooted in homes that strongly supported the ideal of schooling even though the main reason for attending school, by many, concerned interacting with their friends. The only grounds for opposition, according to respondents, involved the dress code, fighting boredom, and annoying teachers, plus responses to feeling disrespected. Thus, while hip hop culture serves as a large component of a student's identity, such a hip hop identity was not necessarily oppositional to schooling.

#### Bridging Academic and Hip Hop Identity

Ultimately, the present study suggests the importance of bridging academic and hip hop identities. For instance, Geneva Gay (1994) links positive identity with social compatibility and student achievement, writing: “...Since ethnic identity is closely related to academic performance, feelings of personal competence, and social adjustment and all of these are important components of quality education for young adolescents, they all should be taught simultaneously” (p. 76). Here, a strong parallel between identity and academic achievement accentuates the need to engage students in the classroom by delving into their fields of

knowledge and expertise, which in turn leads to improved student-teacher relationships. But, this was not always as easily said as done in the present study.

Out of necessity, many participants, especially young men, acquired “street smarts” (important urban social survival strategies) consistent with expectations in their neighborhoods, issues demonstrated in hip hop style, audio, and video presentations. But, though African American participants valued this particular set of skills acquired at home and in their communities, youth discovered that their sense of what mattered fell outside their schools’ norms. In particular, youths’ presentations of self became a rationale for disciplinary actions ranging from receiving verbal reprimands to being put out of class. As such, a school culture vs. street culture conflict emerged that can signal divergence between academic and social identity (Anderson, 1999).

Scholars argue that schools can have a major impact on the development of students, particularly in shaping student identity. As Banks (2001) explained:

The school culture communicates to students the school’s attitudes toward a range of issues and problems, including how the school views them as human beings and its attitudes toward males, females, exceptional students, and students from various religious, cultural, racial and ethnic groups. (p. 24)

Thus, the likelihood exists that when a school’s culture demeans a student’s culture (and here hip hop culture is implied), students have little choice but to think either of themselves as incompetent and insignificant, or to consider the school misguided. This suggests that schools that effectively communicate acceptance of students’ selves and acknowledge students’ out-of-school cultural affiliations, even hip hop culture, maintain students’ academic affiliations as well.

The present study connects to earlier findings (Crooks, 2004; Dei et al., 1997) addressing the importance of engaging Black student identities in classrooms. Correlations among socialization, language, cultural capital, and identity highlighted the need to integrate students’

experiences (including cultural identities) in learning processes. As has been argued throughout, for African American youth in urban areas, hip hop *culture* is *the* culture, and it serves as the locus around which these youth developed a deep sense of themselves that was not only grounded in being Black, but was also grounded in “street” experiences of urban life. As such these youths’ identity affiliations can reasonably be expected either to have a significant impact on student success, or to lead to student disengagement in school (as seen in Dei et al., 1997). In fact, based on findings in Dei’s study, students in circumstances similar to participants in the present study participated more in learning processes when provided with the opportunity to incorporate a wide range of identities.

In addition, in the present study, findings clearly indicate that male and female respondents felt a stronger connection to teachers who treated them fairly and did not judge youth based on appearances, and to those teachers who allowed them to express themselves in the classroom setting. This echoes earlier research exploring the relationship between identity and schooling, especially research examining the student-teacher dynamic and academic achievement (Solomon, 1997). Solomon’s students, who shared commonalities with their teachers, were more engaged in the classroom. Likewise, respondents in the current study enjoyed attending classes that sparked their interest and in which students had developed a rapport with teachers. Male and female respondents overwhelmingly preferred to attend the middle/high school classes taught by teachers with whom they had a rapport. Thus, it seems reasonable to argue that educators who build a rapport with their students (especially as a result of their commonalities) not only assist in students’ personal and social development, and in affirmation of students, but also improve academic success.

Building rapport need not depend over much on student/teacher sameness, but more

importantly on building up a set of shared experiences (Solomon, 1997). Consequently, and regardless of gender or color, participants in the current study reported that they developed a respect for teachers who did not penalize them for inconsequential issues, such as “sagging” pants or showing a little skin at the midriff. In students’ *hip hop* cultural frame of reference, respect mattered. Teachers’ acting in ways that signaled disrespect to students, such as hide-bound adherence to rules that students knew had little to do with learning, simply returned disrespect to teachers. Teachers’ acceptance of hip hop markers of affiliation (actively ignoring dress code violations) signaled, to students, that teachers respected students, who then in turn respected these teachers. Thus, rather than student/teacher relationships aligning with demographic or other school-aligned ways of sifting and winnowing types of people, rapport between students and teachers built up from small considerations that, to students, signaled acceptance. Here, male and female respondents reported performing well in subjects where teachers incorporated their interests and were enthused about teaching.

Regrettably, respondents often found their hip hop cultural viewpoints not valued in schooling, with subtle reminders indicating their experiences did not matter in schools. Several male respondents reported that conflict occurred, especially when teachers judged young men’s appearance to be “thuggish,” and unfairly termed subdued behaviors insubordinate. Young men consequently “skipped” classes when they felt unfairly treated and in time failed the course.

Hip hop culture held countless possibilities for providing a set of rich, enculturated resources that young African American participants in this study took up in a variety of ways and out of which they built identities. Hip hop culture provided a way for students to embrace their Black, urban experiences, while concurrently acquiring an education. But, all too often, the nuances and salience of hip hop culture—to students’ sense of self, friendships, racial

connections, and overall place in the world and way to make sense of that world—fell outside the bounds of a “proper” education. Instead, markers of hip hop affiliation became educators’ rationale for disciplining students, and this led some students to avoid classes. Hip hop culture, as had been the case in urban Philadelphia’s Black community (Anderson, 1999), connected with “street” life in an urban core and served as a way to claim shared existence. In fact, respect emerged as a central principle of hip hop culture. Disciplining students for clothing choices or “swagga’,” for instance, signaled a lack of respect for students as people who mattered. And, interpreted through a lens grounded in the code of the street, disrespect proved a powerful disincentive for students. Yet, most participants managed to graduate from high school and pursue postsecondary educations. But, one cannot help but wonder how much better they might have achieved had minor changes been made that accorded students respect as member of the hip hop culture.

## APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

**(Hip Hop Affiliations)**

1. I'd like to begin by talking about your affiliation with hip hop. Tell me about how hip hop fits into your life.

Possible Follow-ups:

Just to be sure that I understand what you mean, how would you define hip hop to someone who might not know what that means?

What are all of the places where you participate in hip hop related activities?

What are all of the ways you participate in hip hop?

How does the role of hip hop connect you to other people? (local, national, global?)

2. Earlier you mentioned that hip hop messages related to your life, (if stated or jump in with:) I wonder about the messages that you associate with hip hop. What are all the messages that you associate with hip hop.

Tell me about how you think about or relate to each of these messages.

Possible Follow-ups:

In your mind, what are the dominant messages that seem to resonate with you?

What is it about these that clicks?

What messages do you see related to the way people look that signal to you that they too associate with hip hop?

Could you describe how this might look to a person who does not know anything about hip hop?

What messages do you see in other people's actions that signal to you that they too associate with hip hop?

3. So in what ways does hip hop influence how you live your life?

Possible Follow-ups:

What are all the ways that you, as an individual, signal (or let others know) that you affiliate with hip hop?

Why does hip hop matter to you as a person?

What might be lost, to you, if you did not participate in hip hop?

**(Hip Hop as Resistance, Agents of Resistance)**

4. So, I'd like to shift gears a little, and ask you to tell me about how people from, Shall we say, "mainstream" or those not from hip hop-affiliated circumstances seem to think about hip hop. Could you give me an example of something you've seen or heard that illustrates their sense of hip hop?

Do you think that hip hop practitioners mean to give this sort of message?  
Why do you think this?

5. Are there other ways, besides (whatever the interviewee has mentioned: clothes, Actions, lyrics, loudness, etc.) that hip hop or its practitioners send messages that get this sort of reaction from those not accepting of hip hop?

Possible Follow-ups:

Are there other ways besides...?

### **(Public Schooling and Its Interactions with Hip Hop)**

6. Earlier you told me that you went to an urban public school that set as its goals The same sort of educational results, using basically the same sort of approaches, as suburban schools. Tell me a little bit about your experiences there.

Possible Follow-ups:

Do you think that your experiences were typical of other youth in school at that time?

Were schooling experiences similar for girls and for boys? If not, how did they differ?

Did things change as you moved from grade school to middle school to high school?

How so?

7. How did your school experiences influence how you thought about yourself? How Do you compare these school influences to the influences that you spoke about earlier, the influences that came from hip hop?
8. I wonder if hip hop ever made it into your school. What were all of the ways that hip hop entered the school? (probe for each way hip hop made it in- what were all the ways- then sort into piles that students brought, individuals/teachers brought, school general policies/practices brought- OR start the list and for each item find out who brought it in. Try to find all of these hip hop markers that have been disclosed in earlier parts of the interview and in the literature).
9. How did school teachers and administrators seem to think about hip hop? Could you give me an example to illustrate what you mean when you say... (quote interviewee).
10. How did hip hop influence the ways that you thought about your school experiences?  
Are there other ways?

### **(Advice about Connecting with Hip Hop Youth in Urban Public Schools)**

11. Ok. Lets' dream for a little bit here. Imagine that you were a school teacher or

Interested in public schooling for urban youth, and you knew about what you just told me about your own experiences. What advice would you give teachers about how to better connect with youth who affiliate with hip hop?

Possible Follow-ups:

(Be sure to get specifics!) What would students look like?

What rules might exist?

What would you recommend teaching? How would you teach that?

Tell me what the building would feel like to hip hop youth?



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**ABSTRACT****TEACHING ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS IN MAINSTREAM SCIENCE CLASSROOMS: TEACHER PRACTICE AND EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY**

by

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This study examines the relationship between Black identity, hip hop culture and relevance to the schooling of black youth through an analysis of existing literature and more so, African American youth's sense of these connections. In so doing, it analyzes the various ways in facilitating black youth's resistance and disengagement within the educational system in an attempt to narrow the achievement gap between African American students and their white counterparts.

Hence, four research questions guide this study. How do urban young adults affiliated with hip hop think and talk about the storytelling aspects and notions of self association with hip hop? To what extent might urban young adults experience hip hop as social resistance? How have urban youth associated with hip hop think and talk about the place of school in their lives, experiences with public schooling and it's relevance to their lives? What might their vision/advice for connecting hip hop youth with public schooling be?

In due course, I believe this study will help educators to unravel the complexities of hip hop culture and incorporate this new information into efforts to reach young Black teens in urban schools.

## AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT

My personal narrative sharply contrasts with those whose exposés I have read in examining hip hop, Black identity and schooling. To start, my parents, both immigrants from Poland, settled in the metropolitan Detroit area in the early 1950's. I was raised in a solidly middle-class neighborhood and attended predominantly white, K-12 schools. My schools lacked culturally diverse resources and participants, and possessed teachers who had little to no substantive knowledge of marginalized groups.

Thus, I grew up in an overwhelmingly white community and had few interactions with members of other racial or ethnic communities, except for those who shared my Polish heritage. Yet, I felt drawn to the struggles of African Americans, not fully understanding their situation, nonetheless defending them as I visualized their distressed expressions from the evening news and their crumbling neighborhoods in route to my grandmother's house on Detroit's east side. Conceivably, I compared their struggles to those of my relatives in Poland, including my parents, who endured the atrocities during WWII. At age fifteen, my family traveled to the motherland, still under communist control. My father thought it was imperative for his children to visit the concentration camp in Oswiecim (Auschwitz). The Holocaust unveiled the depths to which man had sunk. My epiphany occurred behind the walls of the preserved gas ovens as I stood near my father. It was then that I decided to follow in his footsteps and become an educator.

As an educator in an urban school district for many years, I teach youth whose sense of themselves seems left out of their educations. In this dissertation, I committed to understanding their side of the story and hope that what I have written here does justice to the trust they placed in me to tell their stories.