WITNESSES WITH A MICROPHONE: TEACHING AND LEARNING IN A HIP HOP LITERACY COMMUNITY

Philip Jude Campbell

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Supervisor of Dissertation:

Ebony Elizabeth Thomas, Assistant Professor of Education

Dean, Graduate School of Education:

Pamela L. Grossman, Dean and Professor

Dissertation Committee:

Ebony Elizabeth Thomas, Assistant Professor
H. Gerald Campano, Associate Professor of Education
Vivian Gadsden, Professor of Education
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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my parents, James and Therese Campbell who always believed that I could be standing where I am today even when I couldn’t see it myself. I would also like to dedicate this dissertation to my wife Karen and our daughters Sara, Katie, and Caroline you have provided me with the motivation to finish the process. I love you all.
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ABSTRACT
WITNESSES WITH A MICROPHONE: TEACHING AND LEARNING IN A HIP HOP LITERACY COMMUNITY

Philip Jude Campbell
Ebony Elizabeth Thomas

Hip-hop is a powerful vehicle for student expression. Many young people today see hip-hop music as an outlet for expression and many of the adults, be they teachers, parents, or law enforcement, are often dismissive of the expression. Schools focused on meeting mandates handed down from departments of education and other political bodies are more interested in competing for scores and they often fail to listen to the people that our society marginalizes most. Educators need to learn to listen to what students have to say through their behavior, their dress, their music and their art, especially music.

Unfortunately, the elements that characterize hip hop culture, specifically, graffiti, music, dress and poetry are often intimidating for adults and make them uncomfortable. This seems to be especially true in schools where hip hop is viewed as counter-productive to the goals of education. Like other styles of art however, hip hop serves as a vehicle for “expressing a range of feelings” that teenagers might otherwise suppress or channel into negative behavior. Allowing students the opportunity to use writing to communicate something meaningful and really paying attention to what they write has to be a primary responsibility of teachers.
This participant observation research project looks at the ways in which the participants in an extra-curricular hip hop music production club contribute to the teaching and learning that take place within a community of practice. Using the four dimensions of critical literacy (Lewison, Leland, & Harste, 2008) the data shows how participants in the program moved from the questioning the hip hop music presented in mainstream culture to creating their music that promotes social justice. The youth and adult members of RapAcademy worked collaboratively to create a community of practice revolving around the literacy experiences generated by the creation of hip hop music.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

In my current position I teach at a small, Catholic, Liberal Arts College in the suburbs of a large northeastern city. At the beginning of each fall semester I do a series of icebreaker activities with my new freshman classes that help the students and me get to know each other. One of the activities I use is called two truths and a lie, where you present three statements as true, while only two are, leaving the rest of the group to guess which statement is not true. I almost universally stump the students because they assume a middle aged white professor in a teacher education program is much more likely to have been a member of a boys’ choir than to have done his doctoral research on an afterschool hip hop music production club.

I did not come to this topic by accident; I have been a fan of hip hop music for almost as long as I can remember. While hip hop dancing (break dancing) had been gaining popularity throughout the 1970’s in urban areas it made it to our suburban area in the early 1980’s and when it did I was waiting. In the summer of 1983, while my contemporaries in urban areas were dancing on corners and playgrounds, I took a hip hop/break dancing class at the dance studio where my sister had been taking ballet lessons. While I recognize the inauthenticity by which I was exposed to the dancing, I was exposed to some of the earliest, popular hip hop music, like Rapper’s Delight and 8^Wonder by Sugarhill Gang, Rockit by Herbie Hancock, White Lines by Melle Mel and The Breaks by Kurtis Blow. By summer’s end I was comfortable poppin’ and lockin’, waving, doing the moonwalk and the robot, it would still be some time before these moves would make their way to my neighborhood when the music became more widely
available and the attendant videos exposed the others to the dance moves of this
burgeoning culture. By the time Run-DMC reignited Boston rock and roll group
Aerosmith’s career with the crossover hit *Walk This Way* and hip hop fully reached the
suburbs, I had been in front of the curve.

The truth is that while I had come to the genre early, my exposure to it was still
very much relegated to what the radio and music television stations were willing to
expose to those who lived outside of urban areas. Hip hop and Rap Music increased in
popularity throughout my high school years and by the time I was beginning college it
was more and more prevalent both on and off of my campus with the Student Activities
office bringing the popular local and relatively safe Rob Base and DJ Easy Rock to
campus to try to sooth my schoolmates increasing appetite for hip hop. During this time
access to more and more music increased as well. Music stores were stocking hip hop
artists on their shelves and I, as well as my suburban contemporaries were buying it up
(at a rate that has been estimated at up to 80% of all sales) as fast as it could be released.
Chuck D of Public Enemy called rap music the Black CNN and I bought in to the notion
that the stories that were being presented through the music were tales that were coming
straight from the life experiences of the artists who were presenting them. After college,
I worked as an outside sales executive; I spent a lot of time in the car going from one
call to another, and I would play cassettes by diverse artists including Public Enemy,
Arrested Development, DJ Jazzy Jeff and Fresh Prince, NWA, Beastie Boys, Tupac, and
Heavy D and the Boyz.

I kept up to date with popular hip hop and rap music through my return to school
and preparation for a career in teaching. The power of hip hop was evident when I began my first teaching assignment as a sixth grade teacher in an elementary school in a large metropolitan area in the northeast that was a major part of the east coast hip hop scene. Two eighth grade students, who had heard me playing hip hop music in my car, approached me to mediate an argument that they had been having. They wanted my opinion on who I thought was the better rapper, Notorious B.I.G. who had been killed a few weeks prior or Tupac Shakur, who predeceased his former friend by a few months. I asked them to make their cases for each and in an effort to get beyond the “I just feel him more” and “his raps are more real” stage that their argument had reached before they approached me, I asked them to actually take time to think about their choices and write down why they believed what they believed. The next day they returned having written down their reasons and sharing examples from the lyrics of each artist to support their contention. I shared the papers with their teacher and she told me that it was the most thoughtful work she had seen from either of them all year.

Over time my students would come to me with artists that they wanted me to listen to and share my opinion, often with a warning not to listen to it in school. I was consistently amazed that my students were willing to share with me what they were listening to as much of it would be, to say the least, inappropriate to bring inside the school walls. Engaging in these conversations however gave me an idea that I could bring some type of hip hop into the classroom. I thought that the perfect place would be during my instruction of poetry. Hip hop lends itself very well to teaching poetic conventions. I decided to introduce the topic using the appropriate for school artists DJ Jazzy Jeff and Fresh Prince. After listening to a few songs however the backlash began.
The students complained that the music was “popcorn rap” and “corny” and one of my students who very much resembled the aforementioned Notorious B.I.G. in stature and coincidentally in Biggie’s telltale speech affect said, “but he still be speaking wrong.” It was this remark that began our first class discussion on the pragmatics of how one speaks in different situations and how there are many ways to speak and that they are very rarely “wrong” but are frequently governed by the situation in which finds oneself.

**Story of the question**

Like many people who were born in the post-civil rights era, I have had a relationship with hip-hop music for over thirty years. Unlike my contemporaries from the Bronx and other urban areas, hip hop was not a part of my life experience until I saw it featured on radio and music television. Having grown up in the suburbs of large northeastern city I didn’t realize that hip hop was growing in scope and popularity until it started appearing with regularity in my living room. Artists like the Sugarhill Gang and Run DMC introduced me to an aspect of America with which I had only limited personal exposure. Throughout my teens and early twenties, I continued to listen to hip hop and found that it appealed to me even though in many ways the stories being presented varied so differently from my own experiences. By the time I arrived at a small school in North Philadelphia for my first teaching assignment, I was quite well versed in the genre. It was at this school that I first realized that hip hop could be used as a means of engaging the young learners with which I worked. It was not unusual to observe students engaging in substantive discussions about the rappers of the day and their lyrical abilities. The students would make their points about lyrical ability citing examples from the songs and rhymes of the rapper that they supported and I found
myself often being asked for my opinion in the ongoing arguments. Many of these same young people, but usually only the boys, would also participate in cyphas, impromptu lyrical competitions where participants would participate in turn showing off their lyrical abilities (flow) while engaging and responding to the lyrics of the previous participant.

Because of my observations about my students, I made efforts to use hip-hop in my instruction, frequently bringing the lyrics of “safe” rappers into the classroom to serve as examples of poetic devices, like simile, metaphor and meter. Additionally, I would use lyrics to give students opportunities to investigate subject-verb agreement. One of the great benefits of the subject-verb agreement conversation was that it allowed us to have a critical conversation about “code-switching” (Delpit, 1995) or moving back and forth between “standard” English and the students’ home language, which was typically African American Vernacular English (AAVE) (Labov, 1972) and how the rappers used specific language to speak to and about specific people. Whether or not I was always successful in my presentation my students seemed to appreciate my effort to include their music in the classroom conversation. I believe that the early conversations that I had with my first class about hip hop and language was probably the first real teaching that I did that year and I know that they impacted the teacher and administrator that I would become.

Hip hop pedagogy is important because it offers an opportunity for teachers and students alike to engage in conversations that have real and significant meaning. Young people realize that hip hop can be a way of sharing the things that are happening to and round them and many are using it for just that. A Google search for unsigned rappers
on youtube yielded 99,800 results in 0.28 of a second which is a staggering number.
Imagine if all of the young people putting their music and videos on the internet had a
teacher that was willing and interested in listening, actually listening and wanting to
hear what their students had to say and further engaged them in conversation about
what they were saying in their music.

Some time back, while standing in a line, I met a classmate whom I had not seen
since high school. We spoke for a few minutes and briefly caught up on the intervening
twenty or so years. He explained that he had been a police officer for our local
transportation agency for several years and was currently a police officer in one of the
first ring suburbs. I told him of my years in urban schools and that I was doing doctoral
work at the university. He expressed interest in my work and inquired further. When I
told him that I found hip-hop to be a powerful vehicle for student expression and was
coordinating an extra-curricular hip-hop music production program and shared some of
the students’ empowering lyrics, he posited, “ninety percent (90%) of the black guys we
arrest have rap lyrics in their pockets.” When I asked if they ever read any of the lyrics
he replied, “why would we?” While I am sure that his statistics were hyperbole, the
point is illustrative of a trend today; many young people today see hip-hop music as an
outlet for expression and many of the adults, be they teachers, parents, or law
enforcement, that interact with them are dismissive of the expression. One exception to
this notion of dismissiveness of hip hop music and lyrical content is those law
enforcement officials, specifically prosecutors, who are using the lyrics of and personas
created by rappers as a means to prove the criminal charges against artists by using their
words to demonstrate a criminal nature when they are put on trial (Cummings, 2010). It
seems that the young men arrested by my school friend and his colleagues were/are lucky to have their lyrics overlooked.

Listening to students’ stories and caring enough to hear them have yielded popular books and movies about its potential for success (Johnson, 1992; Gruwell, 1999). Still, schools are so frequently interested in meeting mandates handed down from departments of education (Federal and State) and other political bodies (NCLB/Race to the Top) that they are so interested in competing for scores that they fail to listen to the people that our society marginalizes most. Cushman (2005) encourages educators to “listen well” to what students have to say through their “behavior, their dress, their music and [their] art.” Cushman goes on to acknowledge that the elements that characterize hip hop culture, specifically, graffiti, music, dress and poetry (rapping) are often intimidating for adults and make them uncomfortable. This seems to be especially true in schools where teachers and administrators view them as counter-productive to the goals of education. Like other styles of art however, these aspects of hip hop serve as vehicles for “expressing a range of feelings” that teenagers might otherwise suppress and/or channel into negative behavior. Giving voice to students the opportunity to use writing to communicate something meaningful (Rose, 1989) and really paying attention to what they are saying has to be a primary responsibility of all teachers, for while teachers can never fully understand the experiences that their students have had, they can learn as much as they let them articulate (Schultz, 2003). While the Hollywood treatment that has been given to the stories of Leanne Johnson and Emily Gruwell and their teaching indicate that if we, as teachers, share our passions with the students that they will just open up and share theirs with us is romantic, the books and films often
gloss over the difficult work that is done by culturally different teachers to develop the trust with their students that is necessary to do the work that needs to be done to get to the stories that are more than just superficial representations of who the students are and the truth of their lives. If teachers can reach their students using such foreign art or historical events as the music of Bob Dylan or the Holocaust, then it seems that integrating the music that surrounds them as a means of reaching them would make a great deal of sense. A teacher does not need to be a hip hop head to use hip hop successfully in the classroom either. One of the ways that trust can begin to be developed is to allow the expertise of the students to guide conversations about the music. When the students realize that the teacher is not trying to use hip hop as a gimmick but rather has a legitimate interest in learning more about the music, whether they like the message or not, it will necessarily change the relationship between the teacher and the students. By expressing an interest in the voices that the students are listening to the teacher invites the students into a discussion that is often avoided in school.

The importance of this conversation cannot be overstated, hip hop is a language of youth and pragmatically it needs to be addressed in the classroom. If, as Dimitriadis (2001) suggests, young people are using hip-hop texts to construct notions of self and community, ignoring or worse dismissing them as connected in some way to criminality or anti-intellectualism does a great disservice to youth. Morell and Duncan-Andrade (2002) tell of witnessing the impact of hip hop music and culture on their students during their time as English teachers at an urban high school in California and how this impact transcended race. They are certainly not the only educators to notice and try to
harness the power of hip hop in the classroom. Some teachers recognize that reading, writing, and speaking are political acts and that literacy is a vehicle for enacting power over their lives and futures (Fisher, 2007; Christensen, 2002). As hip hop music becomes more prolific in our global society, how might, educators in the broad sense realize its potential and its implications for pedagogy and engaging students in a literacy community that valorizes their experiences?

**Significance of the Problem**

Hip hop is everywhere, except in most schools. While classes dealing with topics around hip hop and rap music are becoming more prevalent on college campuses, and some schools, most notably Stanford, Harvard, and Ithaca College, embracing the genre so much as to create archives for all things hip hop, elementary and secondary schools have been slower to embrace the genre systematically and pedagogically (Akom, 2009), with one very notable exception being the High School for Recording Arts in St. Paul Minnesota. That it is so easy to identify the few schools where hip hop is truly embraced academically is troubling when one considers the growing reach of the culture.

With a television remote and a few minutes you can find channels dedicated to hip hop music, commercials using hip hop music to sell products, any number of characters wearing hip hop fashion and even hip hop as the soundtrack to many sporting events. Newsstands and bookstores stock their shelves with magazines like *The Source, Vibe, XXL* and *Hip Hop Weekly* that are dedicated to the goings on in the world of hip hop. Walk down the street and you will likely encounter passing cars or young people with headphones that express their sonic celebration of hip hop culture. While hip-hop
music is certainly prevalent in society, it underscores the rhythms of everyday life in the inner-city (Keyes, 2004) and students in urban environments have largely grown up with it as the soundtrack of their lives (Farley, 1998; Neal, 2006). It is, in fact, the “soundtrack to a new globalization and corporate culture” (Bradley, 2009). While there are several types of hip hop music that challenge the status quo and encourage the empowerment of listeners (old school, underground, political, conscious) what the radio listening public are mostly exposed to is the commercial forms (gangsta, battle, crank, snap) and controlled by corporations that are more interested in selling records than presenting a positive message of the people represented by the music.

Prior to becoming a teacher, my experiences with people who lived hip hop culture and whose lives were presented in rap music in particular were limited. While I enjoyed the beats and rhymes that were being presented through the vehicles of radio and music videos, the songs that I always appreciated most were the ones that told what seemed to be the “real stories” of the artists, what Katja Lee (2008) calls rap’s “autobiographical posture.” It was my personal appreciation that caused me to wonder why hip hop music was not being valued in schools as a vehicle for expression. While some teachers have embraced its power, for instance, by using hip-hop to connect to the traditional canon (Morell & Duncan-Andrade, 2002; Brown, 1996; Hill, 2008) and spoken word poetry to tell students’ stories (Fisher, 2007; Low, 2011), there is little in the literature of classroom teachers using music to get to the stories that the students are willing to, if not want to, share. Mark Lamont Hill (2008) shares the work he did in a classroom where his students used ‘rap texts’ – the lyrics from songs as a way to open conversation and discuss those things that were important to his students and some
others (Mahiri 2004; Alim 2006) who look at the ways young people are using hip hop music in extra-curricular setting and they ways that they use lyrics to represent their stories, worlds, and identities.

Once I saw the value in using hip hop in the classroom, I started to use it much more. As a sixth grade teacher in an urban area I frequently tried to use hip hop music in Language Arts/writing classes to share different examples of writing conventions like simile and metaphor. However, my students often balked at the notion because, as they were more than willing to share, they thought that the music that I was willing to use in class was either “too old school” or “corny” or “popcorn” rap. As one who listened to and appreciated rap music, I could understand my students’ points of view, that artists like DJ Jazzy Jeff and the Fresh Prince (Jeff Townes and Will Smith) who were to my mind, not only developmentally appropriate lyrically, but also had the support of the school’s administration were not as gritty as the artists that were popular with the students at the time, like Notorious B.I.G. (Christopher Wallace) or 2 PAC (Tupac Shakur), were sufficient for illustrating the teaching points that I sought to make.

The genesis of RapAcademy goes back to my first year of doctoral studies, when as a part of a project for class I met with a student whom I had had in class the previous year who expressed his desire to be a rapper and his beliefs that when he was writing his lyrics he got “to say the things that were really important to [him]” (Campbell, 2003) that were otherwise left unsaid. He shared that the work that he did for school he did in effort to “get smarter” so his “rhymes would be better.” This led me to think of the use of autobiography, specifically autobiographical hip hop lyrics, as a means of self-representation. I found that the students that I was working with at the time (African
American fourth grade boys) found the lyrics to hip hop songs much more accessible than traditional forms of autobiography. They generally reported that the music was easier to understand because they could “listen to it instead of having to read it.” Interestingly, when they were given text of the lyrics they engaged with them and often commented on the misconceptions that they had about the lyrics based on what they thought they heard the artist say. This led to many discussions about the importance of clarity of speech and diction.

The experiences that I had with the fourth grade boys confirmed for me that I would use hip hop as a major part of my pedagogy going forward. While serving as the principal of a middle school, I brought hip hop programming to the school early and had several experiences that spoke to the possibilities of hip hop music as part of the curriculum. During my first year, I was facilitating an after-school hip-hop music production club and student from the group, Lady V (all student names changed to their self-selected rap pseudonyms) created a song that spoke to the book The Watsons go to Birmingham, 1963 (Curtis, 1995) and the conversation about the book that had been taking place in class. When I played it for the teacher she was moved to tears, noting with amazement how beautifully the student synthesized all their curricular work in a song.

Another instance when I realized how impactful hip hop music could be in schools was when, using the “I am From” activity presented in Linda Christensen’s Reading, Writing, and Rising Up (2000), the students used hip-hop to express personal narratives. While life outside of school is often pushed to the side in the name of curriculum coverage and standardization, the students told of how things were not always standard.
The themes represented in these works were largely hopeful but, at times, gritty. Over haunting pianos the students shared things about their lives that, unfortunately, seldom find a way into the classroom conversation. Found within the songs are lines that express hopefulness like “I am supposed to be like Harriet Tubman or Martin Luther King or at least the truth – Sojourner” and “from pain so severe but being so filled with love a painful past but prospering journey and future is where I am from.” Within these same songs are lyrics like “I am from where dudes move from being your sister’s kid’s father to being your baby daddy” and “I am from where thugs push drugs to get above.” While these lyrics seem striking they are representative of the types of experiences that the students brought to the project. One student goes so far as to acknowledge that his story might sound harsh to the listener when he says of his neighborhood “It’s like one of the worst places in the city but it’s like paradise to me.” These lyrics tell much more about where the students live in the world than a specific street, neighborhood, or even section of the city could. Even when the students felt comfortable enough to show vulnerability in their lyrics they would still often guard themselves like when after sharing things about his neighborhood like “I am from the six bus, where the prostitutes get picked up/ I am from the guns and where drugs get handled by the tons/ where people live by check to check and if you say the wrong thing somebody’ll snap your neck.”

An interesting aspect of this club for students was that it offered them the chance to try on different identities in a safe space. An example of one student assuming multiple role comes courtesy of Big T, who in different songs adopts alternately a braggadocious, tough guy, materialistic role, when he tells listeners in one song “you better watch your
mouth when I’m walking through the door” an implied threat that if they say anything negative about him he will respond with violence and in another he serves as an introspective critic of the drug culture that is pervasive in his community and how he refuses to let it derail his chances for success in life claiming he will “say no and run” if offered drugs reminding them that “if he wanna get high he’s the stupid one” and that he recognizes the threat of participation in the drug culture to his and his listeners potential futures when he announces to his listeners “I’m definitely drug free Ima be the kinda man that I wanna be I could be a lawyer or defensive tackle but I can’t be that if I’m stuck in shackles”. As an educator I was struck by the clarity with which Big T expressed his ideas of what the future could hold for him if he were able to avoid the temptations of drug use and drug trade that are ever present in the lives of urban youth. Big T was making a bold statement that made it clear he was trying to disrupt the school to prison pipeline that too many African American youth have been unable to avoid.

It is time for educators to take another look at how they and their students can use hip hop to bridge the communication gap that frequently exists in school and use it as a tool for social justice. As Bronwen Low (2011) points out and John McWhorter (2003) illustrates, many teachers look at non-academic literacies and specifically hip hop as, at best, anti-intellectual and more likely completely deficient. However, observing the students in the club space and the recordings that they were creating reinforced my notions that hip hop music could be used in schools to a positive result if teachers could be made aware and encouraged to embrace the opportunity to use it in creative ways. It is not my contention that the hip hop music produced by the emcees or the club in which they produce it will serve to change the trajectories of the lives of the young people
involved. However, I do believe it gives them the opportunity to challenge the societal structures that would label them at-risk, troubled, or dangerous (Noguera, 2004).

By neglecting to engage with students out-of-school literacies, schools ask students to leave part of who they are at the door when they enter and as such effect how the students participate in school as it forces these literacies into an underground curriculum where they are both students and teachers (Low, 2011). In the aforementioned Lady V song 1963, her hook reminds listeners:

We [black people] got through bad times with the music we made With the music somehow we got saved
We made the music with our hearts and our soul And with the music our stories are told
This is the exact role that hip hop pedagogy can play in the lives of today’s youth if it is allowed through the schoolhouse doors; hip hop music can be the key that opens the door of education to those who most need it opened. Hip hop can give students the opportunity to share their troubles with adults who care about them rather than just being labeled as troubled and when the students realize that there are adults that care to listen to them and respect them as experts in their own lives, they might not be so willing to believe that school holds nothing for them.

**Research Questions**

Seeing how students engaged with literacy when given the chance to draw on hip-hop as a medium for self-expression and structural critique led me to design a study that looked at the ways that the participants of an extra-curricular hip hop music production club formed a literacy community and investigated the following questions:

- *What role does hip-hop play in the lives of urban adolescents in an afterschool hip hop music production club?*
• How do the relationships among participants change over time?
• What is the story of this community/what has this community meant to the participants?
• How do the participants see the relationship between their participation in RapAcademy and their more traditional, school-based literacies?

Conceptual frameworks

The theories that will form the conceptual frame for this study will be New Literacy Studies, Critical Social Theory, and Critical Hip Hop Pedagogy.

The paradigmatic revolution (Bartlett and Holland, 2002) toward the New Literacy Studies began in 1984 when Brian Street demonstrated that literacy was embedded in and working through particular cultural, historical, political and social contexts. Street (1995) wanted to investigate the social nature of literacy and move it away from a single neutral Literacy with a big L and a single y toward a place where the specificity of literacies could be described in particular places and times. He also built on Shirley Brice Heath’s (1983) idea of literacy events when he broadened them to literacy practices. Literacy practices refer to “both behavior and the social and cultural conceptualizations that give meaning to the uses of reading and/or writing” (p.2).

While literacy practices incorporate literacy events, they also incorporate “folk models of those events and the ideological preconceptions that underpin them. Barton and Hamilton (1998) simplify the notion saying that literacy practices are the general cultural ways of utilizing written language which people draw upon in their lives. The effects of this evolution are that researchers are using theories and methods from across
a range of fields to look at their work and qualitative research methods have become more accepted in the field.

Stoval (2006) locates hip-hop and rap music as a transformative element in the development of critical teaching and thinking and it is this premise that saw the creation of this project. Student voices are frequently the last ones heard in schools, and RapAcademy seeks to change that. By giving young people (thirteen to nineteen years old) a safe space and the ability to create a product that expresses what they are feeling is a means to invite the students to share aspects of their lives that might otherwise remain invisible. Ernest Morrell (2005) suggests that any pedagogy that has popular culture at the fore has to be a critical pedagogy, where teachers and students learn from one another through authentic dialogue. The dialogue is the reason that this project is important. While the students use the music as a tool to talk back to the situations in their lives they are presenting an autobiographical account of themselves at that moment, in effect, making visible the aspects of life in their neighborhoods, and communities that often go unseen by people from outside. The reading and writing that the students do in the hip-hop club is integrally connected with their identity formation and their construction of self (Collins & Blot, 2003) because their friends, including those following through social networks like Facebook or Soundcloud, and family, know about the project and are frequently asking if the emcees have created anything new that they can hear or when their next concert will take place. This puts the students in a unique position; they have embraced a type of literacy that is common and popular and made it a part of their being. Being emcees, the students have capital that they might not otherwise have had. I want to use the lens of New Literacy Studies to look at
the music created by the students and how it represents them.

Researchers on out-of-school literacy practices of adolescents (Hull and Shultz, 2002; Mahiri and Sablo, 1997; Mahiri, 2004; Gustavson, 2007) investigate the ways that students are using their worlds outside of school to make connections to the literate lives that they are being exposed to within the classroom. There are many differences in the way in which young people engage in literacy spaces and practices in and out of school. Foremost among these is that frequently in schools students are encouraged and expected to move systematically through a curriculum under the leadership of the teacher with little or no input into the process. Out of school spaces, structured and non-structured, give students the opportunity to take up issues of literacy - broadly defined- that are important to them, through interaction with peers and adult facilitators. This interaction is especially interesting when looking at ways in which the students can be co-creators, with the adult facilitators of structured programs that incorporate their out of school literacies.

The idea of providing a safe environment for children is important. Glynda Hull (2007) points out that students that participate in after school programs are less likely to engage in risk taking behaviors, while at the same time developing interests and competencies that support academic learning and achievement and more likely to have higher self-esteem than their peers who spend time alone after school (Mertens et al., 2003). The research done on after school programs has pointed to three primary factors for creating settings that promote positive outcomes – first, sustained participation in the program by students, next, quality programming and staffing of the program, and finally, promoting strong community partnerships. Many programs
partner with community based organizations to provide after school services. Researchers have reported a number benefits for such programs, not only as they relate to students’ intellectual and social growth as it pertains to school (Witt & Baker, 1997) but in practices that are specific to the programs themselves. David Schaffer (2006) has identified after school programs and clubs as third spaces where students are free to explore literacy options that may not always be available to them in school; even though the program may be housed in the school building. Community based organizations are uniquely positioned to help students because they can provide opportunities for social and skill development in an environment that is non-threatening where mistakes that students may make are not amplified by the need for all students to be proficient, as is often the case with the classroom. In fact, such programs are frequently able to reach students who are disenchanted with school or hard to reach in the classroom (Hill, 2009).

Furthermore, Deutsch’s (2011) contention that after school programs play a greater role in preventing risk and promoting positive behavior, but more importantly “serve as positive developmental settings that assist youth in negotiating the broader task of adolescence: identity development” (p.179). Further he reminds that in order to help with the process adults who serve as facilitators for after school programs must understand how youth construct identities and how they use local contexts and relationships to negotiate the development of their identities. In the program that he researched the participants had a voice to express how they viewed the world of their program and the world around them, but the number of people hearing their voices was limited. By creating and putting music out into the world the emcees of RapAcademy
are being given the opportunity to reach a much larger audience with their hopes, dreams, and concerns as young people. Smith and Wilhelm (2006) describe embracing out of school interests in a literacy program as “going with the flow”. By going with the flow teachers allow the students to bring their interests to the fore and as a result have a more engaged student population. When discussing contact zones and hybrid literacies Ellen Cushman and Chalon Emmons (2002) point out that when students are able to bring out of school literacies to bear on curricular work, teachers and students can learn from one another in a respectful space. Mahiri (1998) points out the importance of engaging student out of school literacies when he encourages schools to make better connections “between what schools hold as important and what young people find to be meaningful in their daily lives” (p52). As I have previously noted, hip hop and popular culture are important to today’s youth.

While it seems logical to embrace the lives that students lead outside of school, in this era of standardized curriculum and high stakes assessments, students’ out of school literacy experiences are frequently stopped at the schoolhouse door. Hull and Schultz, whose book School’s Out (2002) goes to great lengths to impress upon us the importance of engaging students’ literate lives outside of school with the work that is happening inside schools.

RapAcademy offers students the participants the opportunity to draw inspiration from their own lives and experiences and use elements of hip-hop culture to find ways to express, articulate, and process these experiences, which is at the heart of critical literacy. The works created by the emcees challenge not only the dominant social norms but also the norms presented in the very culture of which they are active members.
Freire’s (1970) notion of literacy as a vehicle to critical consciousness for oppressed peoples is at play in this work. The emcees not only write against injustices that they see in their own lives and in society in general, but they also address the shortcomings that they perceive in current mainstream hip-hop as presented by established artists that the public can hear on the radio. It is through doing this work that the participants at RapAcademy participate and invite others into an alternate discourse about the role of hip-hop music in the lives of urban youth (Morell & Duncan-Andrade, 2004). Morell and Duncan-Andrade (2004) go on to point out that consciousness is developed through participation in social practices. Through collaboration, creation, and presentation, the participants at RapAcademy are engaging in the type of work that challenges the status quo. The emcees are active co-constructors of the program as well (Fisher, 2005b). In the early days of the program the old heads were selecting topics and themes for the youth members to write about, as well as, the musical selections that would be discussed. It was youth resistance to this type of top down pedagogy that led to changes in the overall instructional philosophy of the program. Once given the opportunity to be co-constructors the youth began to engage in ways that they previously had not.

Maisha Fisher (2005a) introduced the literocracy, as an extension of Shor’s theorization of critical literacy, identified as a re-imagined to be inclusive of orality, music, and other creative expressions as a means to social action. Shor (1992) explains that “[c]ritical pedagogy is activist in its questioning of the status quo, in its participatory methods, and its insistence that knowledge is not fixed but is constantly changing” (p. 189) and the work being done at RapAcademy embraces this notion.
There are several teachers that have used hip hop in their classrooms as a way to reach out to students (Brown, Duncan-Andrade, Fisher, Mahiri, Morell, Stovall, Hill) and engage them with the prescribed curriculum. The educators who use hip hop in their classrooms engage with it as a means to help their students practice critical literacy, by which they use hip hop a way to connect their lives outside of school with what is going on inside school. Hip hop music is a place where students can move around and through using home language and lived-through experiences to make connections. Brown (1995) strongly advocates the use of gansta rap in the classroom claiming that to neglect it is to risk widening the gap between the students’ home and school worlds (p29). Morrell and Duncan-Andrade (2002) posit that connecting the representative voice of urban youth (hip hop) with canonical works of poetry will offer an entrée into the world of academic poetic analysis that might otherwise be closed to them. Both Brown (1995) and Mahiri & Sablo (1996) cite the work of Miriam Camitta when advocating for the use of “vernacular writing” in classrooms that serve African American youth. They argue that by allowing students to use language that conforms to cultural and social norms, rather than traditional institutional norms offers students the opportunity to use the language that they are most comfortable with as the means for expressing their ideas. It is this type of writing that grounds the work of Maisha Fisher as well. In her 2007 book, Writing in Rhythm, Fisher identifies a group of students that work in an accelerated power writing program that is school sanctioned but gives them the opportunity to write in ways that are typically not offered in traditional schools. Sanchez (2010) and Hill (2009) bring analysis of hip hop texts as a means for reaching students who have not been successful in traditional classrooms. Both found that
students labeled underprepared or remedial in traditional classrooms are able to analyze method and message of hip hop music expertly when given the opportunity. These examples show how when education is grounded in students’ lives and experiences they start to serve a dual role as student and teacher if the adults working with them are willing to listen. In the preface to Maisha Fishers book (2007), Ann Hass Dyson identifies the “voices of the students’ everyday lives [as] the experiential source of inspiration, the situated stuff of critical reflection, [and] the raw material for the crafting of the young poets in formation.” (p. x)

In addition to the work done by teachers, there is also a body of work that looks at hip hop as a whole and tries to identify where it fits as a culture in the larger social realm in America. It is in this area where advocates for and opponents of the influence of hip hop on the youth of America engage in conversation (Rose, McWhorter, Perry, and Asante Jr.). Many of the researchers looking at where hip hop music fits in the larger culture look specifically at its political roots and nature, its use of language, specifically vernacular language, and the longing for identity. Perry (2004) points out that “even for those [emcees] not explicitly political in terms of the content of their work, one still at times finds a politically motivated relationship between the music and mainstream society” (p. 28) and Rose (1994) in her discussion of the early roots of hip-hop points out that it began as a necessarily political response to the social and economic changes taking place in America’s urban areas, and specifically Bronx, New York, during the latter part of the decade of the 1970’s. African American youth responded to the changes that they saw around them in the way that felt most comfortable, musically. In the more than three decades since, there have been several
changes in the presentation of hip-hop music, but one idea remains central to the form even if it has been co-opted in the presentation and that is the notion of “keeping it real”. Both Rose (2008) and McWhorter (2008), among others, take up this notion what is real and how it is presented in hip-hop music and what it means for African American people in America if it is real. This idea of realness is one of the central tenets of the RapAcademy Program and an idea that the emcees took up on a posse cut written to mainstream artists. As such, this work will looked at not only look at how hip hop music can be used to reach out to students, but will also look at how the students and educators involved in the program navigate the culture of hip hop to produce songs and poetry that reflect the world that they live in and the one that they would like to see.

Donna Alverman (2008) among others (Gee, Moje, Gustavson) points out that adolescent literacy is linked to the social practices in which they engage which include reading, writing and other modes of communication in which they engage. It is the combination of these modes that leads to a sociocultural view of writing in which the students through interactions with texts and experts for authentic purposes (Morrell, 2008) engage with the discourses of a particular community (Moje, et al., 2008). Researchers are applying the hip-hop parlance of remix to adolescent literacy practice (Gainer and Lapp, 2010; Callahan and King, 2011) as a way of defining a practice by which teachers and students “mash up” traditional methods with out of school literacies or technology.

**Historical Context**

While some historians trace the roots of hip hop back to the early part of the last century, hip hop, as we know it, has been in existence since the early part of the
seventies (1970s) when it was originated in Bronx, New York. During the early days of hip hop music there were many factors at play in the city of New York that made it an environment ripe for the type of sonic revolution that was about to happen. Having just come through the turbulent decade of the 1960s during which the city was the site of the assassination of Malcolm X and many protest movements there was willingness by the city’s residents to argue back against perceived injustices. The citizens of New York would not sit back and let things happen without standing up. There were Civil Rights Protests, Anti-war protests as well as several high profile strikes which impacted the city including strikes by teachers, sanitation workers and the transit union. Coupled with the loss of many manufacturing jobs, the city was dealing with some harsh financial issues.

As the decade of the 1970s began the issues that had been prevalent in the previous decade began to impact the city at large, but especially hard hit was the borough of the Bronx. Among the issues that the people of the Bronx borough of New York were dealing with included decreased school funding which led to the dismantling of school music programs for children. It was not just the school that were facing dark days, the borough itself was impacted greatly by the completion of the Cross Bronx Expressway in 1972, which effectively cut the borough off from the rest of the city and thrust most of the residents into poverty.

But there would be music, and at the forefront of the music would be a young Jamaican immigrant, Clive Campbell, who performed under the moniker DJ Kool Herc. Campbell is regarded by many as one of the most influential performers in the early days
of hip hop (Chang, Rose, Kitwana) with the his parties, specifically parties that he would host and DJ in local parks, where he frequently borrowed power for his equipment from city street lights, becoming legendary. During the early seventies the other original elements of hip hop - breakdancing, graffiti and emceeing, started to become more prevalent as well.

Throughout the 1970s hip hop music became ever more popular in New York City. The Sugarhill Gang’s *Rapper’s Delight* was the first hip hop record to break into the mainstream and gain popularity nationwide. Many early hip hop records were loosely connected to the disco records that came before them and were accessible and dance friendly. Logically, as the popularity of hip hop increased it could not be confined to one city any longer and began to spread to other areas of the United States. This growth continued throughout the 1980s with hip hop making its presence felt in countries around the world. However in was still in the U.S. where most of hip hop focus lay and the artists that entering the arena were decidedly more political in nature.

A change in hip hop music happened in the late 1980s when the Los Angeles Rap group N.W.A. burst onto the scene with a full scale assault on hip hop with what has come to be known as Gangsta Rap. They were not the first performers of this genre as Philadelphia’s Schooly D and Los Angeles Ice-T had previously created music that focused on the violent lifestyles and impoverished conditions being faced by many inner-city youths. Early gangsta rap was also inherently political in nature. The artists who were presenting this style of hip hop were using lyrics which, in many ways, glorified criminal activity while engaging in social commentary.

The popularity of gangsta rap led into the 1990s when it became widely accepted that
the largest consumers of hip hop music were white, suburban, teenage, males. This led to a precipitous decline in the social and political messages that were being presented in the music. It was determined by the record companies that the type of music that the money spending demographic wanted was more violent, misogynistic, hyper-sexualized and materialistic. Those artists that were still making music that was political in nature or was more socially conscious were pushed to the margins while artists who were willing to caricature themselves and other African Americans, while claiming to keep it real, were rewarded financially. This financial set-up encouraged many artists who are/were talented lyricists to sell out for the money.

In the vein of “keeping it real” the 1990s also saw a regionalization of hip hop music in the United States. Artists were embracing musical styles that represented the area of the country in which they lived all while engaging in modern day minstrelsy where many artists would tell fabricated stories over regionally identifiable, catchy beats.

By the turn of the century, the popularity of hip hop music had made it prevalent in almost all areas of life in America. It has and continues to serve as background music for professional athletic events, and is used to market everything from soda to automobiles. In 2005, as the principal of a middle school I saw a need for students to engage with the music in ways that would allow them to interrogate the messages that were being presented and create their own music that really does “keep it real.” The adults that were instrumental in making that initial program successful went on to create a stand-alone organization that offers the same opportunity to young people throughout the city. In the intervening ten years that continues to be the goal and the numbers of
youth that are participating increases every year. In an interesting coincidence during
that same time rappers who are considered conscious, like Lupe Fiasco, Kendrick
Lamar, and J. Cole are making social awareness in hip hop more mainstream. The work
of these artists as well as the work of the youth participants is certainly more
metacognitively aware. By looking critically at what others are doing in the creation of
their music it raises self-awareness in their own creative process.

Critical Hip Hop Pedagogy (CHHP) builds on the work of Freire because it focuses
not on adults but youth and how deconstruct the material, social, and political conditions
that oppress them (Akkom, 2009). It is through this process that young people build a
community. Building on Freire’s notion of critical praxis, youth can use hip hop as a
means to engage in real issues that are taking place in their lives and confront the causes
of oppression rather than allowing themselves to be victims of a system that seems to be
set up to ensure their failure. The work that is being done at RapAcademy has, at its
root, a desire to help youth in the city work against, through actions and words, the
injustices that they see in the world. One example of Critical Hip Hop Pedagogy in
action came when Lady V, at an open mic event issued the head of the school district a
warning when she told the crowd,

“I will not be denied my right to prosper even with my hands clamped by the
spread evil monster/ the head of the school district excuse me miss hello are you
listening to this?/ Who do you think you are to judge me yet not give me the right
to be educated about my rights/ this is not right/but bounce back because for this I
will fight/because civil disobedience it is my right./

Lady V was railing against the injustice that she saw taking place within the school
district and how the cuts that were being made across the district were harmful to the prospects of the students and the notion that student voices were actively being ignored by the district administration.

Clearly, this young woman embraced the ideas of critical social theory and critical hip hop pedagogy using the language of youth (hip hop) to address that which she found to be unjust.

**Organization of the dissertation**

In the rest of this chapter I offer the theoretical frameworks for the study. Drawing on three frameworks - literacy as a social practice, critical social theory and critical hip hop pedagogy - I understand RapAcademy to be a literacy community where participants can make connections, across generations, through the use and development of hip-hop music.

In chapter 2, I discuss the methodology and methods of the study. I designed a five-month qualitative study to reflect my belief that when youth and adults work together to co-create an extra-curricular program all members gain from the experience. Inspired by the collaborative nature of the work being done by the members of RapAcademy I have asked the members of the program to read my work and provide feedback to ensure that I am representing them accurately through my words and descriptions. I will explain how the data will be presented and analyzed using the four dimensions of critical literacy (Lewison, Leland, & Harste, 2008) and communities of practice (Lave and Wegner, 1998) as the analytical lenses.

In chapters 3-6, I will look at the critical themes that emerged from the data. In chapter 3, I look at the history of the community and the participants that have stayed
and left across time. In chapter 4, I look at the role that the Mr. Jim and other adults assume within the community. In chapter 5, I look closely at the student participation and investigate how participants, both primary and peripheral impacted the community. In the final chapter, I offer pedagogical and research implications of the study.
CHAPTER 2
METHODOLOGY AND DATA ANALYSIS

In the last chapter, I explained why it is important to look what is happening within the confines of RapAcademy as it pertains to the relationship that the participants have with one another and the genre of hip hop itself. In this chapter, I will introduce the setting in which the study took place, unpack my role in the program and how and why I have chosen to do this research; explaining how the work is situated in the traditions of practitioner inquiry, autoethnography and narrative inquiry, and finish with a note on humanizing research as it pertains to the analysis of the data collected.

**Underground Hip Hop - Literally**

While RapAcademy has inhabited three different settings during its existence, during the study it was housed in a studio space located in what is being called the Loft district, which is situated just north of center city. The 180,000 square foot building was originally built in the 1920's to house a paper company. The building currently provides both residential and commercial spaces which are occupied by a daycare, social advocacy groups, as well as several artists and artistic ventures. It is well lit and conveniently located near public transportation. The basement of the building houses a 12,000-square- foot venue that can accommodate a wide variety of performance types. The stated goal of the space is to provide an outlet for talented, emerging, often experimental, struggling artists to have their voices heard, develop a following and, ultimately, to be able to make their livings from their art. To facilitate this they have
committed to making the venue available entirely free of charge to the artists.

The meeting space is separated into four parts by a series of doors. The outermost space is a subterranean lounge area that rests in a now defunct elevator shaft with exposed brick and stone walls. The décor is bohemian with couches and an industrial wooden wire spool turned on its side to act as a table. The studio area itself consists of three rooms – the live room, a recording booth and the engineer’s room. The live room has several musical instruments lying about including bongos, keyboards, pianos, various stringed instruments and a full drum kit. Additionally, the live room has a series of microphones that are both on stands and free for handheld use. The recording booth is a small, lamp lit, wood paneled room with a microphone stand and a music stand that is located adjacent to the engineer’s room. By virtue of a small set of stairs the performer is several feet above the engineer’s room. The engineer’s room is located at the intersection of the open studio and the recording booth. It is a soundproofed room with a double door system and several chairs and sofas and serves as the primary meeting space for the program.

The program’s meeting place is neutral by design for two reasons. First, the coordinators did not want to be beholden to the school calendar; second, and more importantly, the program is open to any student aged 13-19 in the city and the coordinators were hesitant to limit the location to a school which comes with the attendant politics of who is and is not permitted to enter the space which may have led to feelings of discomfort among the participants. The feeling of ownership for the space
needed to be equal and that cannot happen if the participants inhabit the space differently at different times.

**Participants: Who Lives in this Community?**

When the group that would become RapAcademy started meeting it was being called, by the adult facilitators, the Saturday Morning Rap Collaborative (SMRC) and was an informal group that was meeting on Saturday mornings. There were initially three adults and eight student participants in the group. I mention this group here because their participation informs the program as it exists today and the insight that they brought impacts today’s participants.

**Table 1**

Members of Saturday Morning Rap Collaborative

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Grade*</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Gender</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lady V</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teddy G</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deuces</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flowman</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tha Kid</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lil Kwa</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young Leem</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nate</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Paul</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Jim</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Mr. C  n/a  White  Male

Table 2
Members of RapAcademy at the time of data collection

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Gender</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>Lady V</td>
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<td>Black</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lyric</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Black</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kayla</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mont Magnolia</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Devon</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideal</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tony Beats</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cameron</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raw D</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khari</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Ali</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Jim</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. C.</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Antwon</td>
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<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brian</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucky</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As evidenced in the tables above all of the youth participants are African American and the majority of the adults that have been involved are Caucasians. I will address this issue later in a section about authenticity in hip-hop where I will investigate, through research and discussion with participants, the construct of realness and what the adults in the program bring to the program.

All of the participants in this extra-curricular program have chosen to participate and, as it does not take place in any of their school sites, have to make an effort to attend. Lyric expresses her belief that credit goes to Mr. Jim for the student participation stating “Mr. Jim is super cool to go to with a problem, and we all just fall in love with that so we keep coming back.” Mont Magnolia gives the adults of the program credit also identifying them as being “not like some teachers. They are our mentors and our friends.” While all of the participants had been exposed to hip-hop at varying levels not all were comfortable with the idea of writing or recording songs when they first started working with RapAcademy. Mr. Jim identifies one of the great achievements of the program being the growth in confidence that he has seen in the participants over time noting that “kids who were shy and timid at first have become much more expressive.”

Mr. Jim and the other adult facilitators have tried to create a program where the
student participants can “come hang out and talk about things that are on their minds. They turn that into music and something that they can share with their family and friends.”

The students have very strong feelings about hip hop music. Lady V says that the hip hop that can be heard on the radio is “trash, just trash,” but makes a distinction that “some emcees are doing it right” and clarifies that “you know not everyone is making music just to make money, but they are, like, trying to say something real.” This is one of the strengths Lady V sees in RapAcademy, she says, “we get to say the things that are really happening in the world and not just making up fictional stories to try to make money.” Other participants concur with this point, Lyric takes Lady V’s point even further when she opines at the reasons artists make up stories for their songs is that “the record companies [are] just tryin to make money so if they can get people to trip in they songs, they gonna make more.” The conversation of “realness” is one that is taken up fairly frequently at RapAcademy. One day while listening each other’s lyrics Mont Magnolia told another participant “those lyrics don’t sound right, it’s because that ain’t you man.” By challenging the authenticity of the lyrics Mont Magnolia made the other participant rethink what he was saying and that eventually led to a rewrite of the lyrics. When the participant shared the lyrics again, Mont Magnolia nodded his head and said, “see that’s what I’m talking about.” Since the emcees interrogate their own music for authenticity it makes applying the same process to the lyrics of published recording artists easier as well. Lady V demonstrated her displease for current rap music when
she talked about how she has evolved as a listener when she claims, “when I was younger I would just listen to a song without really thinking about it and if the beat was hot I would like it and want to listen to it, now it’s like the lyrics are the first thing I listen to and if they are sending the right message I like the song more.” Mr. Jim acknowledges that the emcees have come a long way and that “really keeping it real is a constant challenge because the [emcees] know what sells and they want their songs to be popular just like any artist would but [he] doesn’t want them to sacrifice their integrity for the sake of popularity.”

The students give various reasons for joining and staying with RapAcademy, Lady V says “as long as there is a RapAcademy I am going to be a part of it” even going so far as to say that see herself being an adult volunteer with the program because “I have gotten so much out of my time with RapAcademy I feel like I just want to help others have the same opportunities.” In many ways Lady V has already lived this philosophy. The program did not run for a year and it was Lady V that reached out first to the emcees and then to the oldheads to restart it so she and the others would have a place to “hang out and make music that mattered.” Mont Magnolia tells that he started with the program when he was attending [the charter school] where it originated and that he continued attending because he “had his people there and Mr. Jim would do anything to help [the members of RapAcademy].” Lyric has a more emotional response, when she says, “man, RapAcademy is my family. I met people at RapAcademy that are closer to me than anyone else. I never had a sister, but here I met my sisters, for real.” Lady V
also notes that through RapAcademy she has developed and strengthened relationships that she may not have otherwise had, “[Lyric] is like my other little sister. Sometimes I feel like she’s at my house more than I am and we would never have met each other if it wasn’t for RapAcademy.

**Design of the Study**

In the early stages of the program, I served as the principal of the school where it was taking place and one of the most compelling aspects to me was the ways in which the students that were participating were interrogating and taking up the practice of hip hop music. As an authority figure and educator in their lives I was especially interested in the ways in which the girls participated. Rapper and hip hop pioneer Chuck D of Public Enemy is attributed with calling rap music the “CNN of the ghetto” and I have always been intrigued with the ways that the students used the music to create a representation of their world which they were willing to share with other people. Having spent more than a decade working with urban youth I knew that many were (and are) unwilling to share their real stories with others, but I believe that this is mainly because they believe no one is listening. By giving the students a vehicle for sharing and then listening, really listening, they were encouraged to continue. Many students make a choice to keep their school and home lives separate, choosing to not share with the adults in either space what is happening in the other. Other researchers (Fisher, Gustavson, Low, Mahiri) have shown that poetry and hip hop can be an entrée into the lives of students if teachers are willing to engage authentically. Sociologist John
McWhorter (2008) has argued that hip hop is not a political movement, and that people who are “under the impression that hip hop is a new civil rights revolution will only siphon off energy from the real work that needs to be done” (p 13) and with respect, I disagree. Hip hop, especially when used for educational purposes, is at its heart political. Giving voice to the voiceless is a political act and listening and engaging those voices is also inherently political.

My work in this dissertation is situated in three methodological traditions; participant observation, autoethnography and narrative inquiry. I am intimately connected to the work being done at RapAcademy and am a proponent of the use of hip hop as a means of engaging students. Hip hop has been ever present throughout my teaching career. From my first class of sixth grade students, to the middle school where I served as principal, to the university where I currently teach it has had an impact on my students and therefore on my practice. In the tradition of practitioner inquiry (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 1993) I have interrogated how this genre of music impacted the work that was happening in my classroom and how I have and am interacting with it in personal and professional ways. In the early days of my career I looked for ways to bring the interests of my students into the classroom making connections to individual student’s out-of-school lives and the curriculum where appropriate. I love hip hop music and try to keep up with the artists that are moving the genre forward, but I often have a very hard time listening to mainstream hip hop because of the negative storytelling so frequently found in the lyrics and the stereotypes that are reproduced for
the audience at the behest of the record companies. I have found in my practice however that many young people do not want to go ‘digging in the crates’ to find the type of music that has the power to make them think, they would rather let the music of currently popular artists wash over them without thought. The result of our mutual resistance is a relationship where my role is both teacher and student and my students get to as serve the same roles. By talking with and listening to all the participants of RapAcademy a more complete picture emerges because the various points of view offer different lenses on the program. At the time of the study I had worked with Mr. Jim as a collaborator for several years and our conversations often focused on his, my, or our collective practice within the program. We always look at what is happening within the program from an inquiry stance, bringing questions and observations to each other and having substantive conversations to work through happenings that may be troubling us. Adopting the Freirean notion of that teachers are learners and learners are teachers I felt it was important to investigate the practice of the emcees as well. While looking at my practice and the practices of the old heads and the emcees at RapAcademy I needed to determine in what ways I would be able to tell the stories of the participants and the program and I settled on autoethnography, as there is no way to extricate myself from the work of the program and the programs history, and narrative inquiry which affords me the opportunity to tell the story of the old heads and emcees.

Throughout this dissertation I develop case studies weaving autoethnography and narrative inquiry as a means of story-telling. As a practitioner who has adopted an
inquiry stance autoethnography seems a natural presentation style for my work. I have been so deeply ingrained in the work that I seldom take the opportunity to really look at the workings RapAcademy, its product or its participants through a critical lens. Though the use of autoethnography I was able to challenge what I think I know about what was going on in the program. I have frequently noted to Mr. Jim, typically right before I ask him to read something that I have written, to read as if he knew nothing about the program. Without fail he will return the paper to me marked up with questions and suggestions, typically with a note that reminds me that there are several passages that seem intuitive to me (us) because we live in the day to day of the program but that an outside reader might not and that I need to address the blind spots in the work (Hughes, 2008). The reflexive nature of autoethnography also points back to the inquiry stance which undergirds my practice, encouraging me to listen to the young people with whom we work and think of the types of questions generated through my relationships with them as well as the adult participants of RapAcademy. Autoethnography also gives me the opportunity to interrogate the different types of privilege that I bring to the work that I do, both as a participant observer of RapAcademy and a researcher who will be presenting the stories of the program for larger academic consumption. As the presenter of these stories it is my duty to acknowledge, respect and understand that the other participants in the program are coming to our shared space from many different cultural backgrounds (Glowacki-Dudka, et al., 2005). The first step to ensure a respectful presentation was to recognize that while I was a participant in the program I was in
many ways an outsider. Through the various roles I played in the lives of the participants (teacher, principal, mentor, friend) it would seem that I would be a cultural insider within RapAcademy, but in many ways I was not. I had held a position of authority in the lives of many of the participants and the new members who only knew me through RapAcademy were slow to trust the “old white guy” that definitely does not give off a hip hop vibe in dress or demeanor. For this dissertation I dedicated my focus to the participants with whom I had the longest standing and most trusting relationships. I recognized early in the process that I would be sharing my version of events that took place at RapAcademy and that my retellings may not represent the stories the in the same ways that others experienced them. In an effort to ensure that I was representing the stories in ways that were authentic I asked several participants to check my memories to ensure they remembered them the same way. There were a few instances where I remembered an event happening and one of the primary participants in the event recalled it differently letting me know that sometimes my eyes didn’t see the whole picture. Having the participants serve as member-checkers gave me a great deal more confidence in my presentation of the events that took place at RapAcademy. Having member-checkers was invaluable as I moved from stories of self and my participation to the stories of the old heads and emcees and how they participated and engaged with one another.

Autoethnography and narrative inquiry work very well together for the type of story- telling that I do throughout this dissertation. As I mentioned, the focal subjects of
this dissertation are the participants at RapAcademy with whom I had the longest standing and most trusting relationships. I chose to focus on their stories for two main reasons, first, we had developed a shared history (an ourstory) and second, they were the most willing to give of their time outside of the confines of the weekly meetings. Narrative inquiry focuses on the “place, temporality, and sociality within our own life stories and within the experiences of the participants” (Caine, et.al, 2013). It is this relational engagement that was most helpful to me, as I looked at a snapshot of the goings-on with a small window in the life of the program I was acutely aware of life stories and experiences of the focal participants. Having been a participant in throughout the history of RapAcademy I developed deep relationships and genuine affection for the participants, and my first responsibility in the presentation of this work is to them. While I initially entered their world as an outsider whose sole responsibility was their formal education, over time they accepted me as an important adult in their lives and shared stories of their lives with me. Over the years my own story has continued and woven itself with theirs in ways that I could not have foreseen when I began my teaching career. Through the use autoethnography and narrative inquiry under the umbrella of practitioner inquiry I aim to present our stories in relation to one another and interrogate how it has had an impact on my practice.

During the planning phases of this project I thought that I would look more at the texts as a way of gaining insight into the ways the emcees enact identity through the stories they told in their songs. While I still believe that that study would have been
interesting I recognize that it would have largely been an exercise in textual analysis that would fall short of representing the importance of this program in the lives of the participants. As I began to think about the ways in which I could investigate the program and its participants I realized that one of the most interesting aspects of this program was that I helped to create it, stepped away from it and then re-engaged with it to complete my research. That the program would carry on without me and grow into an organization that served a much greater population and purpose was something that I did not anticipate when it began. While there were some youth participants that were hold-overs from a time when I was more formally engaged with the program, there were many new participants both youth and adult that I would need to get to know in order for the study to be a success. I designed a five-month qualitative study to reflect my belief that when youth and adults work together to co-create an extra-curricular program all members gain from the experience. Using hip-hop music as a vehicle the program at RapAcademy offers students the opportunity to initiate social change. I felt the need to use several qualitative methods because of the complexity of the story being told and the multiple voices that were telling it. Drawing on ethnographic, case study and interview methods, I studied the ways in which ten middle and high school students and the six adults, who were consistent participants, worked to co-create a hip-hop literacy community.

Throughout the course of the study there were several other adults and students that participated in the program for a limited time whose presence, of course, also impacted
the development of the community but did not continue long enough to become focal members of the project.

Being a participant observer naturally led to an ethnographic method where, positioned as a member of the community, I attempted to make the familiar strange (Erikson, 1986) by looking more closely at the interactions and behaviors that were taking place during the meeting and the ways that the participants communicated with one another. During the course of the study I did have focal participants who I looked at more closely based on the responses of the participants and my desire to look at how these participants were looked at and saw themselves as a part of the fabric of the community in its developmental stages. Using these methods I sought to understand the role that hip-hop plays in the lives of the participants and the RapAcademy community, the story of the observed literacy community including what it has meant to the members and how the relationships between the members have changed over time and finally, I sought to understand the connections the participants made, if any, between their participation in RapAcademy and their more traditional, school-based literacies?

Using participant observation I attempted to engage in what Django Paris (2013) calls humanizing research, which is a “methodological stance which requires that our inquiries involve dialogic consciousness-raising and the building of relationships of care and dignity for both researchers and participants” (p. 139-140). Furthermore, I agreed that there was an ethical need to include the members of RapAcademy in the
representation in order to give them an opportunity to talk back not only to the findings, but to the research act itself. To wit the members of RapAcademy knew from the outset that I was doing my research about the program and the work that the group was doing together and I asked them to help me to accurately represent the goings on of the program. I offered to share my work with them before publication and asked them to provide feedback if they thought that I was in any way misrepresenting them or the events that took place during the course of the study. I thought that this step was especially fitting as in the work I was looking at the ways that the participants co-constructed the literacy community, so should it be that they participate in the construction of its representation.

Over the course of the five month period between February 2012 and June 2012 RapAcademy met twenty times on Monday afternoons. They met at the studio space between 4 pm and 7pm. Seidman (2006) points out that there are many ways that researchers can look at organizations. I used several data collection methods: participant observation, audio recording and transcription of group meetings, informal interviews, and collection of student created texts (rhyme books and recordings). I observed the group meetings and kept field notes. By engaging in participant observation I was able watch the interactions between program members, and offer input into the process. There are several spaces that the participants inhabit throughout the course of the session and at various times I was able to run an audio recorder in the spaces in which I was unable to be a participant. My desire to be unobtrusive with the
recording devices led to a lack of quality audio recordings. The general lack of clarity of the recordings was owed mostly to proximity to the intended conversations. At some times the recorder was too far from the conversational action and could not pick up all the speakers voices and at others it was close enough but drowned out by the peripheral noise, which was mostly attributed to play backs of song recordings or new beats that the participants were listening to while they spoke. In addition to the scant audio recordings I made jottings (Emerson, Fretz and Shaw, 1995) in my field journal. In my field notes I made notations about who attended and to what degree they participated, highlighted using key words sections of the audio that that I wanted investigate further and noted when necessary non-verbal expressions that might have an impact or I might want to follow up on in interviews. I used diagrams to note the seating arrangements of the participants and made time notations to indicate when participants were in the different work areas (lounge, control room, live room) and when they were in the booth. All field notes were kept in marble composition books and later typed into a word document.

I was able to observe and participate in many conversations throughout the course of the study that were informed by sessions, historical artifacts and student texts. These conversations offered insights into the lived experiences of the participants and the meanings that they have made from these experiences (Seidman, 2006). These conversations helped us to find common ground experientially and build a greater bond of trust. Talking with them offered historical context for the program and affirmed their
worth as members of the program in an historical context. As the study continued I was aware that as the students were sharing memories and recollections with me but that they were framing these recollections and memories to match their current conception of who they are and their role in the program.

For generations African American Vernacular English (AAVE) has been stigmatized (Wheeler et al., 2012) institutionally as a means of formal communication even though decades ago research showed it to be a syntactically based language (Labov, 1972). This stigmatization continues today even as it becomes more audible in the popular culture through the prevalence of hip hop as an expression of corporate and commercial America. As much of the language presented throughout this research belongs to the youth (emcees) and adult (oldheads) members of RapAcademy I will be leaving it in its original form. That will mean in many cases it will subscribe to the norms set forth in African American Vernacular English, largely recognized as the language of hip hop. I believe that the participants’ authentic voices are of paramount importance and that changing them in any way would be disrespectful to them and detrimental to the presentation of their ideas. Furthermore, by changing their responses to fit into the syntactic confines of Dominant American English (DAE) would be counterintuitive to the goals and mission of RapAcademy. By creating a program that has at its heart the mission, to initiate social change through innovative creative arts programming rooted in Hip-Hop Culture, the participants of RapAcademy are actively working at sustaining and growing through hip hop culture. The oldheads are embrace
the notion of culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris, 2012; Paris and Alim, 2014) by encouraging the youth to use their language to critically interrogate the world that they see. While it is important for young people to learn the ways the language are used by those who hold economic power in America it is equally important for them to stay connected to the people with whom they live.

One of the richest sources of data was the student created text. Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) encourage researchers to take into account the documents that created within the social setting being investigated. For the purposes of this study I defined the term document more broadly to include those documents produced by the participants and recordings of the works produced by the participants. Some of the participants have been involved in one capacity or another with Mr. Jim and RapAcademy type programs for several years and have created quite an extensive catalog of work. Throughout the life of the program there have been more than one hundred recorded products, many of which feature current participants of RapAcademy. Additionally, the students gave me access to their rhyme books which include written lyrics and poetry that has and has not been recorded. While I did not do a formal text analysis of the documents that were created by the participants I did use the data to inform the on-going interviews.

**Humanizing the Research**

As I have mentioned above, I have been involved in working with the RapAcademy participants in one capacity or another for many years and it is impossible for me to
present their work dispassionately. The participants of the program are very much Gramscian “organic intellectuals” who articulate, through the lens of hip hop music, the stories, feelings and experiences which most mainstream hip hop artists cannot or will not express. The work that they do and the people that they have and are becoming are as important to me as the success of any of my students.

From the beginning of the Saturday Morning Rap Collaborative I made it clear to the participants that I would be writing about them and their work. Those early sessions were videotaped by a documentarian as part of a potential film. At the time all participants and their parents signed releases acknowledging that their words and likenesses would be used in a film. To that end the student participants have always been interested in the progress of the research. Whenever I see Lil’ Kwa (who no longer participates in RapAcademy) he always asks how I am doing with “the book” that I am writing. I have also shared the writing that I have done with the participants as a way of member checking what I have written. I asked all of the participants to read what I had written as a means of insuring an accurate representation of the events as I have provided them. Following the advice of Hubbard and Power (1999) I have mulled over the feedback and incorporated the changes that told the story more completely.

Because of the varying roles I have played in the program and in the lives of the participants I had to unpack the position that I would take up as a participant observer. Gary Alan Fine (1987) identified four roles that an adult observer may adopt when working with children: leader, who is identified as the adult who has authority over the
subjects and also attempts to maintain friendly relations with them; the supervisor who has the authority over the subjects but makes no attempt to establish friendly relations; the observer, the ideal, who has neither positive contact with the subjects nor the authority but simply records events without becoming personally involved; and the friend, who couples positive relationships with a minimal amount of authority, which is typical of a traditional participant observational role used to deal with adults. Knowing that I could not escape the shared history that I had with many of the participants through which they knew me in a position of authority I could never be the observer that Fine described. I was no longer in any way responsible for the day to day operations of the program so my position of authority for its working was truly limited to just showing up when they were meeting so that eliminated the leader and supervisor roles as well, so I settled into the friend role. Having a great amount of respect for the emcees, not only for the work that they do, but as people this was a very easy transition. Having been a teacher and administrator for several years, I had the experience of having prior students get older and become adults and attending to the shifting dynamic in the relationships that occurs with that growth. I have always been interested in the ways that students express themselves upon realizing the altered power dynamic. Interestingly, my former students always seemed to remain respectful of the teacher/student relationship we had by continuing to communicate using the conventions that we had established when we worked together years prior. Having served as the principal at the school where several of the emcees attended, the same dynamic seemed to be at play. As time went on we
would have a conversation that freed them to use language around or in front of me that they would not have imagined I would find to be acceptable. I knew that if I was going to be a participant in the program that I had to allow the emcees the freedom to express themselves as they saw fit and that if I in any way served as an impediment to that expression I would be doing a disservice to the program and the trusting community that was being developed.

**Data Analysis**

Data analysis was on-going and recursive. After increasingly closer readings of transcriptions and field notes I discovered patterns. After having discovered the patterns I set to weaving a narrative that was reflective of participants’ voices, mine and the members of RapAcademy in a series of case studies. I chunked the information into three data chapters for this dissertation that would be reflective of the communal experience of RapAcademy, the first places the current study into the historical context of the program from its beginnings looking closely at the participation and growth of one youth participant, Lady V, the second looks at the role and responsibilities of Mr. Jim, focusing on his thoughts about the program his practice and the tensions that arise between the oldheads and the emcees, and the third looks at the focuses on the emcees, how they take up roles in the construction and continuation of RapAcademy, the relationships that they have developed with the other participants in RapAcademy and the role they see hip hop music playing in their lives and education.

I added a layer of data analysis by asking members of RapAcademy to read the
narrative and give me feedback to ensure that I was representing the story of the program in its most accurate light. After securing initial feedback from the participants to ensure that I was accurately representing the events that took place and the conversations that were shared in each of the chapters I analyzed each case using the four dimensions of critical literacy (Lewison, Leland, & Hartse, 2008) and the work of Lave and Wegner (1991) as a lens for looking at the program as a community of practice. While each of the four dimensions has its own focus, disrupting the commonplace, interrogating multiple viewpoints, focusing on sociopolitical issues, and taking action to promote social justice, in their analytical application I found them to be very intertwined. The four dimensions of critical literacy work very well alongside communities of practice when looking at the literacy community that was developed at RapAcademy.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I shared the methodology of the present study, including the setting, the participants, the study design and a note on humanizing the research. In the next chapter I will tell the collaborative history of RapAcademy from its beginnings as a school-based extra-curricular program to the city-wide non-profit organization that it became over time. I will look closely at the community of practice that developed over time and will focus on the participation of one emcee, Lady V, and her role in ensuring the growth and success of the program. The history will be told by weaving together my institutional memory with the voices and recollections of many of the participants.
CHAPTER 3
LET THE BEAT DROP: THE HISTORY OF RAPACADEMY

In the last chapter, I shared the braided approach that I used to investigate the ways in which the old heads and emcees at RapAcademy create the literacy community that they exist within. Situating the work in the tradition of participant observation I propose to weave autoethnography and narrative inquiry into a cohesive story telling project. I will concurrently analyze the data using the four dimensions of critical literacy and communities of practice. The present research is a snapshot of time in the history of a RapAcademy and as the members were not recruited specifically for this research but rather had the research happen in their space, I believe it important to draw on their institutional history in order to tell a collaborative history of the program. The life histories of the participants are inextricably connected to the history of RapAcademy and the stories that impacted their lives also impacted their participation in the program and the program itself. In this chapter I will look to answer the question what is the story of this community/what has this community meant to the participants? More specifically I will focus on a particular emcee, Lady V and look more closely at how she showed growth over time through her participation in RapAcademy.

Unlike most educational studies, the program that serves as the focus of this study was not originally designed to be studied. The program was initiated to simply be an extracurricular program offered to the students of a particular middle school following daily classes of a summer induction program that was mandatory for all students who
were newly enrolled to the school. In this chapter, I share a history of the program that is today called RapAcademy. It is not my story of the program, but rather a collaborative telling, an “ourstory” of the program throughout I will include as many of the voices from the program, past and present as I can so that my memories are accurate and match up with those of the others who were involved. I have not only spoken at length with many of the participants but have asked them to read the final product to insure the accuracy of my memory.

“But how is this Practitioner Inquiry?” Project Origins

While completing my coursework, I had the opportunity to design a program on which I would work with a group of young men in an extra-curricular setting. We met several days a week, during their fifth grade school year. This continued a daily program that took place the summer before they entered fifth grade. During the preparations for the summer program the question above – “But how is this Practitioner Inquiry?” -- was posed to me by my professor. At the time I really did not know how to answer it. While travelling the road with the boys it became clearer how it was, in fact, practitioner inquiry, and the questions generated about my practice and how I interacted with the students in the program led to creation of Blackboard Labs that I write about today. During a series of pre-interviews it became clear to me that while I had always made an effort to get to know my students, that knowledge had really always been very superficial. Typically, they are aware of the sports they played or their other activities in which they participated, and I was certainly aware of the
adult or adults who represented them when it came to school purposes. What I realized during those initial interviews is that I really didn’t know much beyond that. I was not really getting to know them and that the only way I was going to get to know my students in authentic ways was by encouraging them to share with me those things that were important to them. In an effort to achieve this goal we started our program with a project that embraced photography and writing to create autobiographies.

It would become evident later that I was asking for an amount of trust that they were not prepared in those first weeks to provide. While we also spent quite a lot of time talking about the issues and expectations that they were facing as pre-teen African American boys growing up in an urban environment, initially the conversations were very one sided with my brother and me doing most of the talking. While we knew the boys through our roles as teachers in the school they were less than willing to engage in the early conversations, in which we were asking them to share personal information, opting instead to assume what Stevenson (2003) calls the “cool pose” using non-verbal communication to express that while I am here, you cannot make me share if I don’t want to share. Based on the fact that the boys had been together in a single gender class since the beginning of third grade and had a great deal of inside information and jokes with one another it was evident that my brother and I were the outsiders that were trying to break into the group. Another dynamic that was at play within the program was the power dynamic that was in place as a result of our role on the faculty. We spent a great deal of time trying to disrupt the dynamic so the boys would be afforded the opportunity
to assume ownership of the program. Music was a topic that came up again and again and it was music that offered us our first real chance to reach the boys. We spoke openly about the music and the messages that it was sending to people, especially young black males about what it meant to grow up in neighborhoods like theirs. We talked about how the messages being presented in songs and the boys tried to make text to life connections between what they were hearing and the things that they saw happening in their own neighborhoods. Frequently, they were able to recognize aspects of the lyrics as real to their experience but often they thought that artists were just making up stories because they wanted to make themselves sound tougher than they actually were. Through conversation the boys recognized that mainstream rappers were saying many things for the purpose of gaining street cred (creditability from the listener) and they did not feel as if this inauthenticity was an issue because even if the stories were not their own, they had “probably happened to someone they knew.” The idea of it happened to someone else would appear frequently throughout the year, often when the boys themselves were rapping.

In addition to talking about music the boys liked to “spit freestyles” - a practice of making up spontaneous lyrics. It was during these freestyles, when the boys were trying to impress each other with their lyrical skills and braggadocio that they really pulled back the curtain and shared who it was that they thought they were and how they wanted to represent themselves. As a teacher who thought I had created a more pedagogically grounded vehicle for sharing their stories I was amazed at how little they
had shared in their aforementioned autobiography projects. We provided each of the boys with a twenty-four picture disposable camera and asked them to take pictures of people places and things that were important to them for use in a photo-autobiography. The each took the cameras and took twenty-four pictures, with varying degrees of success. We had the pictures developed and made two copies of each, wanting to have an extra in case of any unforeseen mishaps. After the pictures were developed we worked together to complete the layout for a book for each of the boys. Once they had decided on a layout they pasted the pictures directly to the page. The next step was to photo copy the books so the boys had a black and white mock-up on which they could draft their text. Upon completion of the draft the boys completed the assignment by writing the text with their choice of pen on paper or pasted computer generated text which could also be pasted onto the pages alongside the photos. Each of the boys completed the project and shared pictures of things like their room, their drums, or their video game consoles, but more frequently their pictures were of the people that were important to them; parents, grandparents, siblings and cousins that would often be labeled very simply with the name of the person. Recognizing that the project was for them and not us we didn’t push them to add more detail than they were comfortable. The autobiography project took on real significance about a month after we completed it. One of the boys, D-Rock, came to the program one afternoon and was visibly upset, when we asked what was wrong, he asked if we still had the extra set of pictures. I said that I did and he asked if he could have his because he needed the picture that he took of
his cousin. I said of course and inquired if everything was ok, to which D-Rock told the group that his cousin had been shot and killed the night before and that he had taken the last picture of him alive. It was this tragedy that, in many ways, solidified our community because the other boys, who had been in class with D-rock all day, immediately seized the moment to console him and ask why he didn’t tell them earlier.

My time with them was also one of enculturation for me. I had always like hip-hop and rap music and having taught in an urban school had been familiar with phrases that were born in the music but when talking with the boys they opened my eyes to the meanings and sub-meaning of different vocabulary. One afternoon while playing basketball two of the boys, MJ and lil’ Kwa had a disagreement over what one of them considered a foul, rather than just calling it and letting it go they began having and argument that eventually led to pushing and shoving. During the brief shoving match they repeated “get back” and “no, you get back.” I separated them and had them sit on separate benches while I worked out what had happened. Both laid the blame for the altercation at the feet of the other and neither wanted to apologize. I asked why they kept saying “get back” and was informed that it was from a Ludicrous song, with which I was unfamiliar, of the same name and meant if they didn’t want to get beat up they should back away. After that day, I was always in tune to the phrase and would give my attention to any situation once I heard it used. Students had always used a variety of terms found in hip-hop in my classroom but I typically discouraged the use of pejorative terms like ‘buster’ for someone whom they held in contempt, ‘hater’ for someone who
they believed was envious of another and ‘ghetto’ for someone who behaved inappropriately, because of the harsh tone with which they were normally delivered. The students frequently used terms that were more positive also like ‘word’ when they wanted to be sure that something that they had heard was true and ‘that’s dope’ when they were especially happy with some happening in the classroom. Our conversations were not the first time that I had endeavored to use hip-hop and rap music in education, but it was the first time that I realized that some of the ways that I had been using it (i.e. teaching writing conventions and demonstrating lyrical voice) was barely scratching the surface and that the students, not me, were really in the position to be the teachers. One afternoon I was to be teaching about poetry, specifically simile and metaphor, and thought that I would bolster my lesson by bringing in rap lyrics. I chose as an example the song by DJ Jazzy Jeff and the Fresh Prince, due primarily to the inoffensive nature of most of the lyrics presented in their music. After sharing a song with the boys and asking them for their thoughts about Will Smith’s use of metaphor in the song they responded instead about the aesthetic of the song commenting that it was “corny” and “wack,” meaning that they were not as ‘real’ as compared to the lyrics of songs that they listened to, even the edited versions of songs that they heard on the radio. When I explained that the reason that I chose the song was because the language used was more appropriate for a school setting one of the boys ‘Eddie’ challenged the choice remarking that “he still talks black” when referring to his use of African American Vernacular English. When I asked him to clarify his thinking, he went on to tell me that “rap music
isn’t real poetry because it doesn’t use school language”; pushing further for his true meaning he explained that “poetry sounds like white people are saying it and rap is just rap.” This was a unique experience for me because it was the first time that I had to convince an African-American student that the language that rappers were using and the messages that they were using was worth their attention. I paired the song with a more traditional selection of poetry and after provided the text of another song and asked the students to find examples of metaphor. While completing the assignment the students asked if there were metaphors in all rap songs and I admitted that I had no idea about all songs but that I couldn’t think of an example that did not include metaphors. I asked them if they could think of examples of metaphor in the songs that they liked. Once they understood what they were looking for they were able to share many examples. Beginning with this class we began to look together at the poetic elements found in rap lyrics and have more and more conversations where the students were invited to bring examples of the songs they like into the conversation. We spoke at length about the different songs and artists including ones that I had not heard of and would probably not be listening to if they had not been brought to my attention by the students. It was not unusual for a student to come to class with a new CD and ask if I had heard of the artist yet, only to lend me the CD so I could listen to it and we could discuss it the next time we met. The most interesting aspect of this practice was that the students almost always had and shared with me the explicit version of the CD which included the types of language and imagery that they knew would not be allowed in our general conversation.
I was interested that my students’ parents would allow them to have the explicit version and would return them to the parents rather than the student so I was certain that they did know. The most interesting aspect pedagogically for me was that once we agreed that we would not discuss the explicit language we could begin the real discussions about the messages that were being presented. The way that we were talking about hip-hop music encouraged me that the music could be more than a tool for corporations to make money off the backs of their artists, but that it could be used for social justice education because they could share in and on their own terms the aspects of their lives and experiences that were causing them confusion. I was bothered by the contention that poetry “sounds like white people are saying it and shortly after the conversation above shared with them Tupac Shakur’s poem “And 2morrow” from The Rose That Grew from Concrete:

    Today is filled with anger
    fueled with hidden
    hate scared of being
    outcast afraid of
    common fate Today
    is built of tragedies
    which no one wants 2
    face nightmares 2
    humanities and
    morally disgraced
    Tonight is filled with
    rage violence in the
    air
    children bred with
    ruthlessness because no
    one at home cares
    Tonight I lay my head
down but the pressure
never stops knawing at
my sanity
content when I am dropped
But 2morow I c change
a chance 2 build a new
Built on spirit intent of
heart and ideals
based on truth
and tomorrow I wake with second
wind and strong because of pride
2 know I fought with all my heart 2 keep my
dream alive

The conversation that we had immediately after sharing this poem is one of the
most profound experiences of my teaching career. “Eddie” began the conversation by
saying “I didn’t even know Tupac was a poet” which drew an immediate response from
the others about how rap is poetry and that “he” (me) “told us that last time we talked
about poetry.” After the boisterous start to the conversation the boys shared what they
wanted to be when they grew up. The adult dreams ranged from NBA player and artist
to doctor and teacher. D-Rock said, “I just want to live long enough to get out of the
city man” and Del followed up with “I know that’s right.” We then talked about what
the poem means to them and they shared ways that they made connections with different
parts of the poem. I encouraged them to think about the way the poem made them feel
when they were writing their own poetry. Lil’Kwa, who had aspirations of being a
rapper shared that he “tries to write about his anger” in his lyrics so he wouldn’t be so
mad all the time.
With this group I had inadvertently created a community of practice with. By offering a voluntary program to them and encouraging them to take ownership for the types of things that would happen within the confines of the program we truly became a group with shared interests who came together to work with and challenge each other on a path to growth and students and young African American men. While we were not a community of practice in the traditional sense because we were not connected through a professional field we certainly came together and learned from each other while developing personally.

After having spent two years working with the boys in that program I was offered the opportunity to take over as the principal of Charter Middle School (CMS), located blocks from my original school and the program that would become RapAcademy began. The following section will highlight the origin of the hip hop music production club at Charter Middle School.

**Summer in the City: The Beginning of the hip hop program**

In May 2005, I was hired as the principal of a charter sixth to eighth grade middle school and would begin the first week of July with the start of the summer enrichment program. The summer enrichment program, as it was euphemistically called, served a dual purpose; it was a remedial summer school program for students who had not done well academically during the prior school year and an induction program for emcees who were new to the school. Part of my responsibilities included the hiring of teachers and instructional aides and developing extra-curricular programming for the students.
During my studies at the University I got to know and work with a young African-American woman named Roxanne Griot, and when I began at Charter Middle School she was one of the first people I reached out to in an effort to get her to teach at the school. While it would have been my desire to hire her as a full-time English instructor, I knew that she would be, at the end of the summer, leaving the United States to teach in China for two years. We spoke at length about ways that she might be able to contribute to the school and decided that the best way would be to coordinate an extracurricular program, for girls in the school, which would run concurrently to the summer program. The goal was to provide a program that would draw upon two of Roxanne’s strengths, hip hop and critical literacy. In addition to having just completed her Masters’ degree in education, she was also a poet and hip-hop artist. Her idea was to consolidate the ideas of critical literacy, which teachers use as pedagogical approach that looks at the forces that shape students’ lives, and hip-hop into a program that would give girls of the school an opportunity to interrogate hip-hop music of the popular culture, which some scholars have called Critical Hip-Hop Pedagogy (Akom, 2009; Hill, 2009). This struck a chord with me because it seemed to me that it would be very similar to the experience that I had with the boys. The difference between the two programs, however, would be that she was bringing to it a dimension that I had been unable to accomplish. In addition to participating in the critical conversation around the music, the girls were also presented the opportunity to create hip-hop songs of their own that were recorded by Akua using the recording software available on the
iMac laptop (garage band). Watching Roxanne work with the students over the course of the summer program confirmed for me that hip hop had the capacity to be used for positive effect in educational settings. I had spent a great deal of time cultivating trusting relationships with the boys before we got to the point that we could have difficult conversations and Roxanne had the girls engaging in these conversations from almost the first moment she met them. Roxanne met with the girls in the school’s library and I was able to observe their conversations several times. It was amazing to me, as an experienced educator to hear the girls engaging in critical conversation about popular songs of the day. It was as if Roxanne lifted the veil for the girls and they could suddenly see issues with the music and how it was talking to them, as females, that they had been unable to see before. This conversation was similar to the ones that we had been having with the boys but it was on the next level because the girls were being encouraged to speak back to the music in critical and thoughtful ways.

Over the course of five weeks, the girls took the conversation and the songwriting very seriously. They discussed the songs that were being presented on the radio and unpacked the lyrics in order to get “beyond the beat.” Any analytical conversation about hip hop and the lyrics that are presented in mainstream rap music has to, at least, in some way deal with the misogynistic message that is presented by many artists. (Keyes, 2000; Morgan and Neal, 2006; Rose, 2008) Snoop Dog had been encouraging the girls to “drop it like it’s hot,” 50 Cent was inviting them to the “candy shop” and Jay-Z had bemoaned that he had “99 problems but that a bitch ain’t one” and Roxanne
and the girls spoke to these topics right away. One of the questions that framed the conversations that the girls would be having that summer was “when they (hip hop artists) talk about bitches and hoes, how does that make you feel?” While this may seem like a mature question for sixth and seventh grade students to be dealing with it was a part of their everyday reality. By listening to hip hop music the girls would be exposed to this type of negative messaging repeatedly and it was encouraging that they had the opportunity to have a mature discussion around the topic with an African American woman in a school setting where their voices and their feelings about how the music was impacting them was validated. After the girls had an opportunity to respond Roxanne dug deeper to try to have the girls determine whether they thought that the terms represented them or if they were ok with their use because they were just talking about someone else, which was reminiscent of the conversation that began a year earlier at Spellman College where women of the school challenged the misogyny present in the music and videos of the rapper Nelly. The Judge, who participated in this original program, would later say that talking with Roxanne was “like talking with an older sister, like someone you look up to and want to be like.” Roxanne and the girls shared many similarities that went deeper than their common racial background. They all loved poetry and hip hop and used it to express themselves. P.O.C claimed that poetry was “the ink spilling out of her soul” and would have been writing poetry whether or not there was a hip hop program. That the program was taking place during the summer in the afternoon at their school demonstrated their comfort with school and education,
while most students could not wait to get out of school when the official program ended at 12:00 the girls remained for an additional two hours daily. In addition to their analysis of popular music the girls also engaged in conversations about the things that they were seeing in their neighborhood and the things that were happening in their lives, which is one of the goals of critical literacy (Soares & Wood, 2010). Roxanne still marvels at the girls’ willingness to share “the tough stories about the stuff that young black girls go through.” Whether they were more willing to share in writing or conversation, the varied nature of what was being shared changed Roxanne. She reminisced that saw the power that the music has to reach “young girls” and she realized that “there are more girls out there that love the music like [she does]” and always keeps that in mind when she is writing her lyrics. While working with the girls Roxanne was facilitating a program with older girls in another part of the city and acknowledges that she was more touched by the experience with the younger girls because they were “more open to share.” The girls did not just talk about what they saw going on in their lives, neighborhoods and world, they created music that spoke to some of these issues. Before they started writing rhymes they wanted to choose pseudonyms and the process by which they did this was interesting. They engaged in the hip-hop tradition of choosing pseudonyms for themselves like “Ki-ki” which was a play on the young lady’s first name, “Teddy-G” which is interesting because of the typical use of G in hip-hop to symbolize that the user is tough like or is in fact a gangster, but in this instance stood for graham as in the snack food teddy grahams, and “P.O.C.,” an abbreviation for Princess
of Confusion. The girls created beats using the program garage band and wrote rhymes that were recorded onto the hard drive of Roxanne’s computer. Roxanne laments that she was not better organized and more skilled at the time so that the songs that were created still existed and had not been lost. While those original songs are lost to the ether, they were very important first step in creating the program. At the end of the summer program Roxanne left for China but left behind a desire, in the girls, to do something more than just listen to music.

Roxanne and the young women that she worked with that summer laid the foundation for the community of practice that would become RapAcademy. The work that they did together could be interpreted through the dimensions of critical literacy laid out by Lewison, Leland, & Harste (2008). By interrogating the lyrics of songs that were presented on popular radio Roxanne taught the girls to disrupt the commonplace. She encouraged them to hear the lyrics instead of just listening to the music. By listening closely and unpacking the lyrical content that was being presented by mainstream, mostly male artists, on the radio the girls began to recognize the ways in which popular culture could cause damage to young women such as themselves. Once they realized that music was more than a good beat they began to look at whose voices were not being heard and how the lyrics perpetuated the types of racial and gender stereotypes that causes harm to them and their community. Finally, they took action - they created their own music that talked back to the types of things they were hearing on the radio and through this small act of resistance they stood up in the face of the injustices that they
discovered in the music they had previously not paid close attention. These young women along with Roxanne created a community of practice that used literacy, specifically the spoken word to come together in a site of resistance.

**Revolution, Old School and Corny Rap: Hip hop club during the school year**

When the school year started, the girls from the summer program still wanted to continue the hip-hop program. Having an excited group of students, but no facilitator, I agreed to run the club, which would meet on Friday afternoons. Ki-ki, TeddyG and P.O.C. were joined by a new member, who called herself Lady V, to form the core of the students that would start the program. Having seen what happened in the summer program and heard the conversations that were taking place in that space, I felt that it would be important to open the program up to the boys of the school as well. I believed, then as now, that it is important to engage in the difficult conversations if you are to grow and that those conversations cannot be representative of one point of view if there is to be real progress. To that end, I believed it important for the girls to hear what the boys had to say but more so for the boys to hear the girls’ point of view. When we began meeting, the club was entirely made up of girls, but after the first couple sessions some boys began to attend and over time the number of male and female participants evened out. Lady V recalls, “when we first started the club some of the boys thought it was just for girls and that we weren’t serious about rapping, but once they heard us freestyling they wanted to join. The first couple boys to join got teased for joining a
girls club but then more boys and girls joined.”

During the program’s earliest days, the members of the club and I listened to a great deal of music, had critical conversations about the messages presented in the music, talked about how to write lyrics and develop rhyme schemes, and even got together at the end of each week's meeting to have a cypha (an impromptu recitation and sharing of lyrics that are generally created on the spot and reflective of something that another member of the group has said), but it just wasn't enough, the emcees wanted to record. There was some drop off in participation because of the format. While I was very comfortable listening to and leading the discussion to critically interrogate the music, helping with the composition of songs, and even participating in the cypha at the end of the meeting, I was not in a position to produce beats or record music.

The music that we listened to was diverse, sometimes we listened to old school artists that I preferred, including some that the students found corny even if they were representative of the rhyme scheme or theme that I was presenting for that session, and artists that they liked, which I often found unacceptable because of the negative messaging that they frequently presented. Both types of music gave us opportunities to look beyond the beat and more critically at the messages that were being presented, including a study on how revolution is presented in across the scope of rap music.

During our conversations, we spoke at length about the power relationships that surround hip hop music and the language that rappers use (Alim, 2007). One theme we looked at across the timeline of hip hop was revolution. We engaged with works by the
artists Public Enemy, Arrested Development and Talib Kweli around the topic and one of the things that the students noticed immediately was how the music of Public Enemy and Arrested Development while the Music of Talib Kweli sounded more contemporary but that the messages were similar. We unpacked why the massage may or may not be received by people and there was a general consensus that the reason for people’s response might be the same, because the messengers sound angry. There was also some thought that some people might not listen to the message because it being presented by rappers. The recognition by the students that the language of hip hop music is marginalized by many led to conversations about how hip hop might be used to reach more people. We talked about what the message would sound like if it were presented using a less marginalized version of English and I was surprised when they said it would sound like Martin Luther King or Malcolm X, but that people their age “won’t want to listen to that because it is like when their grandparents speak.” I asked the participants to start trying to think of things that they would want to say through music if they thought people were actually listening. The “songs” that the students created were more like spoken word poetry, because we did not have the capacity to perform them to a beat. While it is never easy to say everything that you want to in a traditional verse-chorus-verse song structure it is even more difficult when you are producing the lyrics on the spot, during a cypha, but we used cyphas weekly as a means of practicing cadence and rhyme structure. While I am admittedly not a very good lyricist, I frequently participated in the cypha as a means of keeping it going and
encouraging kids with less confidence to try. Now and again a battle would take place between two participants and it was on one of these occasions that P.O.C. beat me in a battle by calling me out on a line that I frequently used, which Lady V remembered as being very funny. “When [P.O.C.] flipped that ‘off the dome’ line on you it was so funny, we were all laughing because we knew you were going to say it again and she used it before you could. You looked stunned that she did it.” The truth is that I was not expecting it and immediately conceded defeat; however, I was right back at it the next week. I wanted to show the students that you should not let one bad beating stop you from rapping.

Though the format was not optimal, and certainly didn’t meet the expectations of those students that had worked with Roxanne in the summer the program, who complained that it was not as fun without recording and that “all we do is talk.” We continued despite a drop off in participation. Some kids left because they didn’t want to talk about the music in any critical way and some left because they were not getting a chance to record. However, those that persisted would soon be rewarded.

At this point in the history of the program the inability to create and record music really bolstered the community because those who were participating were interested in the social goals of the community (Lave & Wenger, 1991) in as much as we were now fully engaged in looking at the ways in which we could disrupt the commonplace. Looking at music across time gave the students that were participating an idea that the conversations that they were engaging in were worthwhile and that they could see the
ways that the music was used in the past as a way to resist the social conditions that the artists were seeing in their communities. The students often expressed that they could be making the same kind of music if they had the chance.

**The entrance of St. Paul and Mister Jim: Let the Music play!**

During the second semester, while attending a job fair, I met a young music producer who called himself St. Paul. He approached our table and shared the work that he was doing in afterschool and extracurricular programs throughout the city. He told me that he had emcees as young as fourth grade, creating hip-hop music (beats and lyrics) that was both quality and socially responsible. He gave me a demo CD titled 480 that was so named because it was representative of the number of murders that had been committed in the city the previous year. The CD included work that he had been doing with groups throughout the city with emcees ranging in age from ten to eighteen. He spoke briefly about his philosophy that if kids are given the opportunity to use a medium like hip-hop that they can make connections between their lives and the world around them. I was very interested to hear what his emcees had to say when they received that opportunity through St. Paul’s program. In the car later that day, I listened to the CD that he had given me and was impressed by the work that the young people had done. Some of the topics these young emcees dealt with included dealing with the escalating murder crisis in our city and low expectations placed on African-American males by people in their lives and in positions of power.

The next day I called St. Paul and invited him to come to the school for a tour.
When he arrived, I asked POC and Lady V to show the producer around the school. Not only were the two emcees part of the hip-hop club but were exceptional ambassadors for the school. As was customary, I did not join him on the tour. Instead, I asked the girls to show him around the school and tell him the things about the school that they thought he should know. The tour concluded in my office. I asked the girls if they had shared any of their poetry with St. Paul. When they responded that they had not, I asked if they would be willing to share one of their poems. Both agreed and recited some of their original poetry, off the tops of their heads. I thanked the girls and asked them to go back to class. When they left St. Paul said to me, "I have to work with those kids." I agreed and the next Friday, he began working with the hip-hop club.

As soon as St. Paul began working with the students, the community really began to blossom, but there was still something more to the point someone missing. In addition to my role as a principal, I was an adjunct instructor teaching a class in children's literature at the University to students in the Teacher Education Program where I met a young man who was interested in figuring out ways to use hip-hop to reach the young African American students with whom he was working. Throughout the semester we spoke at length about how he could, in fact, use the tools that were available to him to create high interest artifacts that would draw his students to reading. His final project for the class saw the creation of an iBook that used rhythm and cadence to help students read for fluency. Throughout the semester this student, Mr. Jim, and I had many conversations around hip-hop music, and how it can be used by
students and teachers help critically interrogate the world in which our emcees were growing up. It seemed only natural that when he finished his program I asked him to join the hip-hop program as a writing teacher for the emcees. He agreed, and for the final six weeks of program that first year we had a writing teacher and a producer working with the students in the program. It seemed like I had been having the same conversation with Mr. Jim and St. Paul for months about the impact that hip hop music could have if it was used as a vehicle for students to tell real stories about what was going on in their lives and the ways in which they were interacting with the world around them. I knew that Mr. Jim and St. Paul would work well together because I had discussed many times with each man what the program goals should be. During the short time that they worked together the first year they had the students creating songs that were not only catchy, but also socially responsible.

During the final weeks of the school year the program began to show what it could become. When St. Paul began working with the hip hop club in March, the club was restricted to those who had persisted through to his arrival. While I didn’t want to limit the number of student participants I felt strongly that those who stayed deserved the first opportunities to record their work. St. Paul added a new dimension to the program also, beat making. Even the girls that worked with Roxanne the summer before had never created their own beats. Using the school cafeteria as a recording studio, the students were very productive, collaborating on the creation of beats and recording songs. There was a nice mix of students from across the grade levels (6, 7, & 8) participating and we
increased the number of participants after the arrival of Mr. Jim. Most of the remaining
sessions were used to get the emcees acclimated to the equipment and the idea of
recording their songs.

While the community had been strengthening and growing across the course of the
school year the partnership and collaboration of St. Paul and Mr. Jim really solidified
what the program could be and how the participants would develop into active group
that focused on interrogating sociopolitical issues that they saw in the own communities
and the world around them and then had the opportunities to act by recording music that
gave voice to their frustrations with the status quo.

The Return of the Real – Year two and the first recording.

More convinced than ever of the importance of the hip hop music production club I
asked St. Paul and Mr. Jim to return the following year to operate it again. They agreed
and spoke several times during the summer to determine what the club would look like
when the students returned. When the new school year began we had a meeting to
discuss their plans and knowing that we remained aligned philosophically, I took more
of a hands-off approach, and let St. Paul and Mr. Jim run the program with a greater
deal of autonomy. I would still find time on Friday afternoons to observe the program,
and enjoyed being a part of it, but felt that my decreased presence would give the
students the opportunities to deal with issues that they might not feel as comfortable
addressing if the principal was in the room the whole time. When I would stop in, it
was really to be more of an observer than a participant.
My decision was validated, the program ran smoothly meeting every Friday afternoon while school was in session with Jim creating the lessons, leading the writing workshops and helping students create rhymes that were substantial and meaningful and St. Paul working with students to create the beats that the emcees would record their lyrics over as well as being responsible for the recording and production of the songs. All of the students that had participated the year before returned and many new students joined the group. All of the students were given marble copybooks that they could use as their rhyme books and it was during year two that Jim put into place his rule for writing, “you can write anything you want using whatever language you want, but when you record it has to be clean enough for your grandmother to hear.” The freedom to express themselves in ways that were comfortable for them but not typically accepted in school showed the emcees that the old heads in the program were not trying to make them represent themselves in ways that were not authentic but rather they would use the original intent of the lyrics but make the songs ‘radio friendly’.

Another way that Mr. Jim and St. Paul worked to develop trust between themselves and the emcees was by showing that they were willing to take chances as well and record with the emcees. Mr. Jim and St. Paul allowed themselves to be the target of dis (disrespect) tracks that the emcees wanted to record. They were able to take the comments that the emcees made in stride (even putting them on the record) which was not always possible for the emcees to do themselves. The development of this trust with St. Paul and Mr. Jim that was obvious in the recorded work that the emcees were
producing. The emcees were presenting their stories through song that were at times entertaining and funny and at other times heart breaking. As a second year principal in the school I was getting to know the emcees and their families better and developing a trusting bond with them as well. In fact, it was during this year that I first invited the participants of the club to attend my children’s literature class at the University and speak with the teacher education students about poetry, how they use it in their lives as a means of expression, and about the work that they were doing in the hip-hop music production club.

The group continued to meet on Friday afternoons and had a regular attendance of between six and fourteen emcees. The Friday meeting time caused one of the greatest challenges during the year. A new school policy saw detention moved to one day per week on Fridays, and homework club, an afterschool punishment for students who did not complete homework on a given day. Mr. Jim and St. Paul were often frustrated by the club members who would get into trouble or not do homework and therefore would be late or miss the program altogether. While I was not always able to attend the sessions emcees would frequently appear at my door asking if I could come back and listen to something that they had just recorded. I was always willing to listen, offer encouragement, continued to be amazed by the depth they brought to their work. Even though I was taking a largely hands off approach to the program I was still very interested in the products that the emcees were producing and the interactions that were taking place in the program. Mr. Jim, St. Paul and I continued to build a close working relationship.
and had weekly debriefs after the session would end to talk about the day’s session, what they had planned for future sessions and any frustrations that they may be having with the program or the students, like the aforementioned detention and homework club issue.

Despite these setbacks we saw how prolificaly the emcees could write and record. By the end of year St. Paul produced a CD, called *A Scholar’s Progress* that included forty-three (43) separate tracks of poetry and music created by over a dozen different emcees. Fourteen emcees were featured on the CD and countless others attended the program at points throughout the year to offer support or to just check out what was going on with the program. While it makes a certain amount of sense, based on the original thrust of the program, one of the aspects of the program that impressed me most was the number of female participants there were. Many of the participants, and certainly the greatest share of the regular participants were girls. It was during this time that I began to explore ways in which I could use the hip-hop music production club as a site for research.

Initially, I thought that it would be interesting to look at the ways that the girls in the program use the music as a means of representation and identity development.

**Year three – I’m out!: the club moves on without me**

Year three of the program took place at Charter Middle School again even though I was not there to participate, as I had left my position as principal. I stayed in frequent touch with Mr. Jim and St. Paul, and they kept me up to date on what was going on. There was an influx of participants and the emcees seemed to get along well and created music of which they were very proud. With my departure from the school there seemed
to be less enthusiasm on the part of the administration for the program and it was halted after the fall semester. In the shortened time that they had together the group was able to produce eight completed, quality songs creating a more streamlined and professional sounding CD called *The Playground*.

St. Paul and Mr. Jim were very disappointed when they were informed that they would not be returning after the winter break but their disappointment could not compare to that of the students. Lady V recalls, “I felt like I was lost when the program stopped at [Charter Middle School], I mean first you left the school and then [the school’s C.E.O.] stopped the hip hop club, it was like I didn’t even recognize my school anymore.”

Lady V and the other emcees tied much of their identity to the hip hop club. The kids in the school knew who they were and were always asking them if they had recorded anything new that they could share and it was confusing for them when something that they thought was so good and that they had put so much into over the years could be stopped so abruptly. Mont Magnolia, another veteran of the school based program who later joined RapAcademy expressed his gratitude for the school based program, saying, “even though I was only able to do it at Charter Middle School for a short while, I got to meet Mr. Jim and [Lady V] and get cool with them. [Lady V] is like my big sister now.” This to me demonstrates one of the greatest aspects of this community, a sense of community and family among the members.

Even though I was no longer at the school working with the emcees I still invited
them to speak with my class and some of my colleagues at the university asked if they would speak to their classes as well. While they presented to several classes, their most formal presentation was when St. Paul, Mr. Jim, Lady V and Teddy G joined me in presenting at an Education Research Forum, an academic conference that was attended by educators from across the country. During the presentation the participants had the opportunity to tell the gathered audience about the work that they were doing and what it meant to them to have the opportunity to do this work in a school space where hip-hop is not always valorized. When given the opportunity to ask questions of the panel many of the attendees asked questions germane to the classroom. It was interesting to see the interaction between the emcees and teachers in attendance. With a shifted power dynamic (the emcees as experts and the educators as novices) the emcees were able to articulate things that many urban students feel but typically have neither the time nor the confidence to say to their teachers. Many of the teachers seemed to be profoundly impacted by the presentation and made it a point to thank the emcees for sharing their experiences and one of the teachers in the audience asked Lady V if she would mind him creating a video to go with one of the songs that she talked about during the presentation.

The emcees made took a major turn this year moving from thinkers to doers. They really embraced the fourth dimension of critical literacy by taking action. Through the creation of their first cd they let their schoolmates know that they were legitimate artists and that they had a message that they wanted to share about hip hop and the world in
general. Across the forty plus tracks on the cd dealt with topics that ranged from relationships that they were involved in to the prevalence of drug use in their neighborhoods to systems that they saw in the country as a whole that seemed set up to prevent their future success. This was also the year that they began speaking to people outside of their immediate sphere of influence and reaching audiences that would be forever changed by their stories. During this year, while not actively involved in the day to day operations of the program I continued to be impressed with the ways that the emcees were growing as artists and activists. The time that I was able to spend with them convinced me that there was real work for social justice being done and that I needed to reengage.

After a semester off, I approached St. Paul and Mr. Jim with an idea to take the program from a school based program that restricted the pool of students that could participate and offer it to emcees from additional schools. I was certain that I wanted my research focus to be on the participants of the hip-hop music production club but I wanted a neutral space that would offer all participants an equal footing. It was a perfect time to switch locations as the original sixth grade members would be attending high school in the fall and they would not be able to access the school easily enough during the school week because of travel issues. In addition to inviting the participants from the charter school program to attend the new version I was also able to invite the boys with whom I had worked before leaving their school for the position as principal in the charter school. Our idea was that we could invite the emcees we had already
worked with as well as open it up to their friend or to emcees from other schools. The program would be voluntary and would take place at a time that would not conflict with the emcees’ school schedules, Saturday mornings.

**SMRC and our first professional studio: We are not in school anymore.**

It was during the fourth year of the program that I reengaged in a participatory way. Mr. Jim, St. Paul, and I had spoken about moving the program outside of a single school environment and into a more accessible location were participants could come from a greater number of locations. In order to have a program that fit into each of our schedules and gave us the opportunity to still work with emcees from the original charter middle school, we created a Saturday Morning Rap Collaborative (SMRC). The program met every Saturday morning from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. at a recording studio located in the northern section of the city. Situated on the bottom floor of a large Victorian twin home the studio shared space with an organization whose purpose was the unification of African religions in North America. Having become friends with the administrators and owners of both I was able to secure the space and the manpower on a voluntary basis. The nature of this arrangement was not without its flaws. Some Saturdays, we would have to wait up to an hour for someone to open the building. Once inside, however, the sessions were usually productive. We were able to find new emcees from outside the core group to join with the core to create this new program. These new emcees included some with whom I had worked in the boys program that planted the seed of this program in my head and some that learned of the program through flyers that were
placed in local branches of the city library.

Mr. Jim, St. Paul, and I began facilitating the program and were joined by a friend of Mr. Jim’s who is a documentary producer and wanted to film the goings on of the program for a potential film. Mr. Jim and I proceeded as we always had creating lessons picking topics and songs that we thought the emcees would be interested in and willing to write about. While the adults all had trusting relationships with many of the individual emcees, it seems that we largely overestimated the level of trust we could develop with the previously unknown new emcees and the trust the emcees had for the collective. One of the first indications that there might be a problem presented itself during the very first session. We gave the emcees an opportunity to record a freestyle rap, so they could get the feeling for recording in the booth. As the emcees took their turns we heard verses from the returning emcees that were typical of the work usually produced in the program. When one of the new members took his turn he recorded an expletive-laden verse that expressed what he intended to do to a girl that he met at a club. When he finished, the returning emcees and the old-heads explained that that wasn’t the type of music that was created by the program and we had a conversation with all of the emcees about the ‘grand mom rule.’ Unfortunately that young man chose not to return to the program and I believe the experience led to the issue of whether we (the facilitators) could be trusted not to censor what the emcees wanted to say. Lady V recalled, “I was just amazed that he would even think that it was okay to let those words come out of his mouth” and Jim concurred remembering how shocked he was that the
young man thought that his verse “would in any way be okay.”

To say that after the experience of the first class the emcees were resistant to the notion of themes and topics that we had chosen is an understatement. It took us a great deal of time to break through some of the new emcees’ tough exteriors and the emcees that we had worked with at the charter school and I had worked with previously seemed to withdraw sensing the lack of trust. Mr. Jim recalls the emcees resistance, “we created some really great lessons using classic old school songs and the kids just didn’t want to do the work. I just assumed that the relationships that we had with the returning kids would open the door for all of the emcees.”

Having no real understanding of the history of hip hop the emcees were doubly disinterested in the work that we were asking them to do during the week when we were not together. They could not get into songs by Run DMC, Public Enemy and LL Cool J because they were “so old” and the themes that we were asking them to speak to (which were directly tied to the songs) were often left unaddressed because they were not ready to pull back the curtain on that part of their lives. Instead what they did was address the issues that were important to them rather than the issues that we thought should be.

Over the first few months, some of the emcees would write to the topics that we suggested, but some would not write at all or would choose to write what we thought was off-topic. What we were seeing as a frustrating lack of focus on the writing projects that we were assigning was instead a silent rebellion by the emcees. Jim also recalls the frustration, “we gave them the CDs with the songs and provided them with a copy of the
lyrics. I just couldn’t think of any reason why the kids didn’t want to do the work until the day [Tha Kidd] laid it out for us.” While waiting with one of the emcees at the end of a particularly discouraging session in which none of the emcees wrote about the prison industrial complex and the impact it had on their lives as articulated by Public Enemy in *Black Steel in the Hour of Chaos*, he told us that many of the kids would have conversations with each other about the topics but that many of them were not ready to share the same information with us. To illustrate his point he spent the next several minutes, while we waited for his ride to arrive, telling us exactly what he thought of the song and the ways in which the police and the prison system had impacted his life on a macro level through the ways he had seen people in his neighborhood treated by police, including being in a corner store when the police did a ‘jump out’ (the practice of descending on a corner where suspected illegal activities were taking place with several cars and vans and apprehending and questioning everyone that was on the corner) to the micro level where he was present when a favorite uncle was arrested and subsequently went to prison.

The following week we had an in depth conversation about why the writing was not being done and the emcees shared with us their frustrations. Mr. Jim calls this particular session our “come to Jesus meeting” and the emcees were able to share with us all of the frustrations that they had been feeling about the program to that point. From their point of view they were being told what to do and did not have any input into the topics that were being written about or the conversations that were being held on Saturday
mornings. Another issue brought up by the emcees that had been with the program from its days in the charter school was that they felt slowed down because they had to wait for beats and were not able to use the process that had previously been commonplace where St. Paul would provide many beats ahead of time and the emcees could write to them and come in ready to record. While we, the adults facilitating the program, had spent a great deal of time fleshing out our vision of the social justice aspect of the program, linking it to themes and finding songs that we thought should lead to great conversations and enlightenment on the part of the emcees, we forgot the most important part of the process, that we would be working with teenagers who had their own ideas, personalities and identities and that the program was nothing without them.

The most inspiring aspect of the conversation was that once we opened the floor for them to express how they were feeling about the program, positively and negatively, it immediately became better. It seemed that all we had to do was ask them their opinion and the level of trust in the group improved dramatically. Through this conversation we realized that the process of song creation that we were asking the emcees to engage in was counter to all the ways that they wanted to express themselves. We addressed their concerns immediately, staring by agreeing to scrap the adult-created curriculum we had been unintentionally forcing on them. We further agreed to let them guide the conversation by bringing issues that they wanted to talk about to the conversation and trying to make connections to hip hop songs (both current and old school) from Mr. Jim’s expansive Itunes library, as well as, letting them bring songs to the conversation
that they were listening to that we might not be.

Year four saw the addition of another adult facilitator, Miss Alli. Miss Alli was a friend of Mr. Jim and worked as a counselor in one of the city’s alternative education schools. She started joining us for Saturdays and expressed an interest enhancing the work of the emcees through the use of photography in conjunction with the hip-hop music that they were creating. Ms. Alli quickly became a part of the group and her personality helped her to develop relationships with the emcees. This program met every Saturday for one school year and ended when the school year did. After the final Saturday meeting, it seemed like the Saturday Morning Rap Collaborative as a program had also come to an end. While the group had been quite productive in terms of recording songs this year did not yield a CD or other type of finished product that the emcees could take with them.

This year was one of great growth for the program and saw the development of an expanded community of practice. Previously the community had been a group from one school that shared common interest in hip hop and developed together a shared language and understanding of how it could be used to address the world around them but moving off campus from Charter Middle School gave a real opportunity to develop a community of practice. The emcees were no longer a group formed out of convenience whose only requirement for participation was that they stay after school, now they had to be committed to participation because of the Saturday morning meeting times. It was in this year that we saw the attributes of practice – mutual engagement,
joint enterprise, and shared repertoire - (Wenger, 1998) really take shape. By offering a
time that was outside of school hours the participants, oldheads and emcees alike, began
to enact the attributes of communities of practice in a more “professional” way. Over
the course of the year the emcees especially developed and sustained relationships
through mutual engagement developing communal norms to which they would expect
all participants to adhere while they were developing a shared understanding of what it
meant to be a member of the SMRC and how the common language and knowledge that
they shared was an important aspect to the work that they were doing together.

A Year without hip-hop: The work is important, why did we stop?

Once developed, the community of practice lived in the world even when there was
no official meetings the emcees stayed in touch with one another and continued their
shared work. The members of the collaborative did not meet, as a group, the following
year though they did keep in contact with one another and the old heads by telephone
and through social media. The generational peer groups were in close contact and the
mentor relationships seemed to remain strong. The old heads that were part of the
program went back to living life at the breakneck pace that life seems to bring and the
emcees were focused on school and social lives. Even though program was not
meeting some members showed that there was no need to have an organized program to
continue writing and recording. During the time off two members lil’ Kwa and Tha
Kidd recorded mix tapes (self-published collections of original songs on CD created
without the backing of any record label intended for distribution by the artist for the
purposes of making money or gaining exposure), Tha Kidd in a studio with professional
production help and lil’ Kwa in his bedroom using the Garage Band program available
on his MacBook. Tha Kidd frequently put his music up on the social media site
Facebook and it was through one of these postings that Mr. Jim was able to engage in a
conversation about what is appropriate to share with the world through social media and
what might be better shared in a more private way with friends. As Mr. Jim recalled, “I
listened to a song that [Tha Kidd] put on his Facebook page and I felt like I had to reach
out to him right away. I knew he had aspirations to go to college and whether or not he
was smoking as much weed as he said he was on the song outsiders looking at his
profile and listening to his music could only interpret it one way.”

A chance encounter outside a movie theatre between Lady V and one of the
producers (Big Will) that had worked at the studio with the SMRC helped to restart the
program and put it on the path toward becoming RapAcademy. Big Will asked why the
Saturday morning program had stopped and described to Lady V a new program that the
studio was developing that would provide opportunities for young emcees to come in
and record without the typically large overhead that artists incur for using studio time.
Lady V contacted the other members of the group (emcees and old heads) and inquired
as to whether there was interest in reconvening the group. When it was determined that
there was interest Mr. Jim, St. Paul and Ms. Ali contacted the studio and scheduled
times for the group to meet. Before the group was restarted the adult facilitators, led by
Mr. Jim and Ms. Ali had a conversation that would clarify the path the program would
take moving forward. It was determined that if there was to be a program it would need a higher level of legitimacy and that started with a name. While many ideas and names that were generated by the group the final name settled upon was RapAcademy. Academy was a nod to the educational aspect of the program – acknowledging that the education of youth in the city, specifically social justice education was one of the cornerstones of the program and Rap was a nod to foundation of the program being rooted in hip hop. The next step toward legitimacy was filing the appropriate paperwork with the state to operate a non-profit incorporation with that name, which was completed successfully.

The initiative taken by Lady V to reengage all the members of the community of practice was a testament to the importance that it was playing in the lives of the participants. While they were not meeting officially they were still engaging in the practices that helped them develop into a strong group and Lady V through her willingness to act saved and strengthened a community that had come to mean so much to her and the others.

When the group reconvened for the program they were meeting three times per week – Mondays for writing workshop, Wednesdays for beat making, and Sundays for more writing and more intensive studio time.

The Wednesday beat making sessions with St. Paul was a new aspect to the program that was a return to one of his earliest aspirations when he began working with the students at Charter Middle School. He had always wanted the young people he was
working with to do the beat creation also but time limitations had made it extremely
difficult. St. Paul shared his excitement with the addition of this part of the program
recalling, “I always knew that if they had the chance they would make hot beats and
once they figured out what they were doing and how to craft a song they really were.”
Creating beats on Wednesdays was a time consuming process, with the neophyte
producers making a great effort to make the beats well. Again St. Paul recalls, “usually
[emcees] have ideas for songs and they know what they sound like in their head but
sometimes getting the beat to sound the same isn’t as easy.” It was during this time that
the emcees truly began to collaborate with one another for the creation of whole songs.
It was not unusual for one of the emcees to text the others telling them about ideas that
they were thinking of for songs when they were not together as a group. This
collaboration led to the first CD that RapAcademy would produce which included
thirteen tracks and was made up of songs that wholly created by the emcees. One
Wednesday, while riding the bus home after the program met, Lyric was riding the bus
home when a hook for one of the beats they had created came to her. She was so
excited that she recorded it into her phone so she could share it with the rest of the group
at the next meeting. She texted the rest of the group to let them know that she had
recorded the hook for a song called The Greatest and asked if anyone wanted to get on
the song with her. This is only one example of how the creative process became
generative among the members of the group. This generative practice showed how
active the members were in seeking the help and collaboration of the other members of
the group which embraced the characteristics of a community of practice.

As well as this year went creatively and organizationally there were problems. The main problem was that the people that lived in the apartment adjoining the meeting space, who were principles in the studio ownership, were consistently smoking marijuana during the times that the program was meeting. There was a locked door between the two spaces so there was no direct contact by the emcees but the old heads felt increasingly uncomfortable exposing them to the a situation that ran contrary to the stated goals of the program. After the completion of the CD, RapAcademy dissolved their relationship with the studio. The end of this year saw the first live performances by members of RapAcademy. RapAcademy finished the program year by teaming with the members of the Citywide Youth Poetry Movement (CYPM) for an open mic night on the University campus. The event which was attended by a few hundred people, coincided with the release of their first CD, gave them a taste for what it was like to perform live. Their next live performance was a much more intimate album release party which took place at an independent record store in the city. Dissolving the relationship with the studio would turn out to be a very good thing for the continued growth of RapAcademy and the live performances were a preview of things to come for the emcees. Before dissolving the relationship with the studio Mr. Jim realized that he needed a new space in which to meet with the emcees. Serendipitously, the videographer who had filmed the SMRC meetings, a very good friend of Mr. Jim’s worked in an artistic incubator of sorts which was housed in a building in the city’s Loft.
district. In his role as a film maker he had developed a relationship with a music studio within the same building and made an introduction between Mr. Jim and the studio’s owners. The stated goal of the studio was to provide an outlet for talented, emerging, often experimental, struggling artists to have their voices heard, develop a following and, ultimately, to be able to make their livings from their art. The initial space was located on the fourth floor of the building and the emcees were very impressed with the space. Lady V recalls, “it was a real studio, not that [the previous studio] wasn’t real, just [the new studio] was more professional.” Mont Magnolia agreed, “you can tell that these guys were serious. They had a live room and a booth and a control room, there is more space to work and do everything we needed to do.” Mr. Jim met with the studio’s owners and it was decided that RapAcademy would be able to use the studio space, free of charge, on Monday afternoons from 4:00 – 7:00, with the understanding that the production schedule of the studio would take precedence if there were any conflicts. One of the ways that they were able to provide the space gratis was if they did not have to provide production help, so the owners of the studio met with Mr. Jim and provided him with training on the production board and software that the studio used and then stepped back and gave him a great deal of freedom. Mr. Jim shakes his head when he thinks back to those early days, “they left me, who they hardly knew, and my kids alone with thousands of dollars of equipment, things could have gone really badly.” To that end Mr. Jim was constantly vigilant to ensure the space was being used properly and that the emcees were treating it respectfully. Lady V recalled a time when the emcees
were “playing around and Mr. Jim lost it.” She noted that she had never seen him so “angry or serious.” While she acknowledged that they should probably not have been playing around and that he had asked them “a couple times to knock it off” she thought that the display, which was out of character for Mr. Jim was too much.

The relationship between RapAcademy and the studio went very well for the first semester of the school year and over the program’s semester break the studio moved to another part of the building, which is where it was housed during this research.

**Conclusion**

I aimed, through this chapter to share a contextual history of the program and analyze it through the lenses of communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and the four dimensions of critical literacy (Lewison, Leland, & Harste, 2008) leading up to the time of the study. Being a community of practice, of which I was one participant, I have included several voices, including my own in the communal telling of an “ourstory” of the early days of RapAcademy. While it is by no means a comprehensive telling it is representative of the experiences the earliest and current members have shared together and framed the work being done in the program at the time of the current study. I have shared some of stories in the life of the program as experienced by the participants as the community developed. In the next chapter I will look at the ways in which the relationships were developed between the old heads and the emcees paying particular attention to the roles and relationships of RapAcademy’s main facilitator, Mr. Jim in the lives of the emcees. Additionally, I will spend some time looking at the roles
played by the other old heads, including myself and how the emcees interacted with the group.
CHAPTER 4
THE ROLE OF MR. JIM AND THE OLDHEADS

I identify the adults that work with the program as “old heads” which is hip-hop parlance for older members of the culture that have earned the respect of younger people because of their role as mentors and community stake holders. During the course of the project there were several old heads that worked with the emcees. Some of them were weekly participants (Mr. Jim, Antwan, Lucky) others participated when their work schedules allowed (Ms. Ali, Brian) but all had the respect of the emcees. I consider the old heads to be culturally relevant teachers (Ladson-Billings, 1994) that is teachers who see themselves as artists and as part of the community. Seeing themselves as part of the community is not enough in this instance though. The old heads are of a different generation and in the case of Mr. Jim and Ms. Ali, different home cultures. As such, before they could consider themselves part of the community they had to be accepted by the emcees. The old heads set out to create a community, with the emcees, that would be a place where all students can succeed and make connections between their community, national and global identities. The community members are part of one another's lives and their relationships extend beyond the walls of the studio. Together they have and are continuing to develop a community where the members are learning collaboratively, with knowledge being created continuously and flowing back and forth from old heads to emcees and emcees to old heads, thus making everyone teachers (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Knowledge is not taken for granted but rather
looked at critically and the old heads are passionate about their content and encourage the emcees to adopt an inquiry stance. The old heads realize that there are necessary skills that emcees must have to be successful and make sure the students are able to demonstrate these skills.

During the time of observation, a major, historical, figure in hip hop, from the city, Underground OG, attended some sessions and acted as a kind of coach for the emcees, imparting wisdom that could only be gained from decades of being part of hip hop. The old head who attended and facilitated every session was Mr. Jim. Having founded RapAcademy Mr. Jim is the lead facilitator and curriculum designer for the program. In this chapter I am going to focus, primarily, on Mr. Jim and the ways in which he has had an impact on the program and on the lives of the emcees and some of the tensions that have arisen in the work that he does with the emcees.

**What is a white guy doing teaching a hip hop program?**

In the forward to Marc Lamont Hill’s book Beats, Rhymes and Classroom Life (2009) Gloria Ladson Billings discussed the use of hip-hop music to reach out to students as a “great example of culturally relevant teaching” (p. ix) that recognizes students cultural identities as the “stuff” of learning and encourages educators to learn about the students’ cultures and communities. It was this aspect of pedagogical thinking that guided Mr. Jim toward the use of hip hop in his classroom. In 1998, the lead singer of the Fugees, Lauryn Hill pointed out “[t]here are kids in audiences now who weren’t
born when there wasn’t hip hop… they grew up on it; it’s part of the culture” (Farley, 1998) and it is this culture that many teachers are now embracing as a means of engagement for their students. However, hip hop pioneer and scholar KRS-ONE (2015) has argued that when it comes to the actual teaching of real hip hop, many teachers will not engage the topic properly because they “don’t actually live hip hop” and that they remain too objective about the culture choosing to study it rather than being a part of it. He goes on to express concern that if a teacher of hip hop does not participate in the culture themselves then their capacity for “enhancing and empowering” their students’ lives through the use of the genre will fall short of their goals.

While completing the work for his M. Ed., Mr. Jim was fascinated by the ways that he might be able to use hip hop culture as a means to engage his third grade students. Some examples of how he was embracing the culture of hip hop in his classroom included using lyrics to show poetic conventions, placing simple beats under self-made e-books to help students work on fluency and creating a text about graffiti in the city, specifically in the works found in the neighborhoods in which his students lived. More than a pedagogical trick scholars have warned about (Hill, 2009; Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2002; Brown, 1995) Jim believed in the power that hip hop, an art form which surrounded all of his students and one they engaged with daily, could be just the thing to serve as a hook to reach a student that might otherwise not be reached.

Hip hop is often looked at as a genre, in a long tradition of musical genres, which
appeals to youth who feel disempowered in their own lives (Segura, 2015; Perry, 2004; Rose, 2008) and struggle to be heard by the people who reside in power positions (parents, school personnel, legal and governmental authorities, etc.) in their lives. Mr. Jim, a white man, might not seem, at first, like he would be the ideal instructor for a program that has as its base hip hop music, however, Mr. Jim began engaging with hip hop as a youngster growing up in suburban Philadelphia when he convinced his father, in 1987, to purchase Run DMC’s Raising Hell. Having grown up studying classical music, Jim knew “right away” that he “really loved hip hop.” Like most youth in his immediate environment that felt disempowered, Mr. Jim began a relationship with Punk Rock music. His engagement with and participation in Punk Rock did happen independently of his growing appreciation for hip hop music, from those early Run DMC days he has been a hip hop head. He has “always believed that both genres are generated from the same source, questioning authority and trying to find the voice to raise those questions.”

When talking about the white performers in hip hop, Imani Perry (2004) claims that when they become adored by hip hop audiences it is because “of their embrace of both the aesthetic and political location of blackness and their sharing spaces with black bodies, such that their racial privilege becomes at least somewhat obfuscated” (p. 27) and this is reason that a white male can successfully provide a program like RapAcademy. Mr. Jim’s acceptance by the emcees and their families is rooted in the same type of embrace. The work that Mr. Jim has done with Blackboard Labs, to this
point has largely been a labor of love. He works several other jobs so he has the flexibility to run the program on the assigned meeting days. While Mr. Jim embraces the aesthetic and political locations of blackness and shares spaces with black bodies, he recognizes that he has a racial privilege and works to critically interrogate it while also using it for the service of the youth with which he works. It does seem that his racial privilege is at least somewhat obfuscated when it comes to his relationships with the emcees and their parents. As described in the earlier discussion of the use of the N-word, one of the parents expressed that she would not be offended if Mr. Jim used the word because she believed that there would be no malicious intent behind his use. This type of respect was earned by his willingness to create a space for young African American students to engage in the use of hip hop music as a means to critically interrogate and talk back to situations and injustices that they see in their lives and in the world around them. Frequently and consistently, Mr. Jim draws attention to political situations that impact the emcees specifically and the African American community at large and provides time and space for the emcees to take up these issues in whatever ways they see fit. Sometimes this may lead to an artistic response through song and others it may just take the shape of a conversation between the participants that never finds its way into the music. The fact that young people are given an opportunity to take up these issues in a safe and non-judgmental space is sometimes all they want. When talking about these opportunities Lyric put it succinctly when she said “I like that if we got something to say we can say it and nobody gonna tell us we wrong for feeling that
way.” Her sentiment was echoed by others, Lady V when speaking about the lack of opportunities to engage in these types of discussions at the private school she attended said, “at my school people don’t really want to hear about what’s really going on in the city or in my neighborhood, so I don’t even talk about real, real issues at school and it’s ok because I know I’ve got my RapAcademy family.” Mont Magnolia expressed his disappointment with his own school more forcefully saying “man it seems like they don’t even care what we’ve got to say at my school.” By articulating their frustrations with the seeming lack of concern by teachers and administrators at their individual schools the emcees were acknowledging that the adults at RapAcademy are not like the others in their lives and that they know that they will be heard when they speak and they will be encouraged to participate in conversations that their teachers might not think them able. While the emcees believed that they could wait until Monday afternoons to have substantive conversations they were encouraged to bring the conversations back to their schools, with Mr. Jim encouraging them, “you might be surprised who is willing to listen if you give them a chance.”

As an extra-curricular program that uses hip hop music as a means to critically interrogate society RapAcademy encourages the emcees to use the literacies that they bring with them from school and the ones they bring with them from home do the work of the program. It is a third space, one that has a foot in the emcees world of school and one foot in the world of hip hop with the third space created for each to talk back to the other (Benson, 2010). At RapAcademy Mr. Jim has worked to create a space that,
while not connected directly to a specific school, is a place where rigorous thinking and questioning, the kind that should be taking place in school, actually takes place. Together the old heads and the emcees are working to create a space that uses their lived experiences in hip hop to help them engage with their scholastic spaces in ways that are meaningful. Through the work done at RapAcademy the emcees are being reminded that their voice matters and are more willing to engage in critical thinking in their school environments. Their willingness to engage more thoughtfully in school situations has led to greater participation in the arena of challenging what they view as unjust situations from within the traditional school settings with some students participating in the Public School Student Union, a student organization comprised of students from the School District that advocates for improving the educational opportunities for youth in the city.

Mr. Jim and the other old heads serve as mentors for the emcee and serve different roles in their lives. Many of the old heads are Monday contacts, by which I mean they only interact with the emcees within the confines of the program and serve mainly as programmatic support. By contrast, Mr. Jim is a more present in the lives of the emcees keeping in communication with the emcees consistently through both social media and face to face interactions. When asked, all of the emcees list Mr. Jim as a mentor.

Mr. Jim takes his role as a mentor very seriously, he recognizes that he is first and foremost an educator and that his responsibility lies in helping the emcees to grow and develop as members of society that will productively challenge the status quo.
Hollywood is filled with examples the white middle class rescue fantasy, where a white teacher comes in as a savior of sorts who helps the minority students whom they teach to overcome all of the difficulties that they face in their lives (Low, 2011). Mr. Jim readily acknowledges that “these kids would be great no matter what, I just happen to be lucky enough to be the adult that gets to work with them.” Mr. Jim’s belief in his students disrupts the notions that are presented in films like Dangerous Minds or Freedom Writers which present students of color or from traditionally underrepresented groups as inherently culturally deficient and in need of a member of the cultural majority to teach them how to be successful within mainstream society. Mont Magnolia compared Mr. Jim to his other teachers when he said, “Mr. Jim is not like other teachers, he is a friend and a mentor” (Crozier-Fitzgerald, 2012).

Mr. Jim recognizes that his input into the lives and situations that the emcees trust him with can have a great impact on the types of behaviors in which they engage. Lyric recognizes the impact that having Mr. Jim around to talk to has had an impact on her life. She commends Mr. Jim saying “Mr. Jim is super cool to go to with a problem, and we just fall in love with that so we keep coming back. We know there’s a time to play around and a time to get serious.” (Crozier-Fitzgerald, 2012). Lady V described him as being akin to “that really cool older brother that will help you deal with your problems without getting your parents involved unless he has to” adding that “even when we didn’t have the program we still kept in touch and that is what made me want to get it started again.” What is of particular interest is that without the early mentoring
relationship with Lady V, RapAcademy would likely not exist today. During the down year it was the relationships that the early emcees and especially Lady V missed. The seriousness of Mr. Jim’s role of mentor is evident during the program sessions with the types of topics he brings to the table for discussion but also in little ways that may not be so obvious.

Mr. Jim admits that as a young man he was “no angel” so sometimes he feels “hypocritical” when dealing with issues which are presented by the students. One afternoon while working in the writer’s workshop with Antwan one of the emcees packed a pipe with marijuana. Antwan asked the emcee “what kind of afterschool program do you think would let you smoke weed” to which the emcee replied “obviously not this one” and went to the booth for his recording session as if the conversation had not taken place. Mr. Jim pulled him from the booth and had a conversation with him

**Mr. Jim** – Did you really just pull out a bowl in the studio?

**Indiana** - Yes.

**Mr. Jim** – Are you out of your fucking mind?

**Indiana** - Yes.

**Mr. Jim** – Am I ever going to have this conversation with you again?

**Indiana** - No.

**Mr. Jim** – Good. Get your ass back in there and kill it.

There is no escaping the fact that marijuana is prevalent in the lives of the emcees.
It is readily available in their neighborhoods, if not their homes, and it receives a great deal of notoriety in hip hop culture with many signed emcees extolling the virtues of its use. The way that Mr. Jim see it his role as a hip hop mentor is to provide guidance to the emcees that was not available to him during his teen years. If hip hop is meant to nourish its participants by offering community membership that entails a body of cultural knowledge (Perry, 2004) the old heads in the program need to be aware that there are potentially negative aspects that will be associated with the production and construction of that knowledge and they need to be ready to engage in difficult conversations because they are the older members of the community and have the benefit of experience and hindsight. This was an especially interesting event in the history of the community because Indiana had not been a participant in the program when they actively moved away from a studio because of the use of marijuana by the owners of the building. It is now included in the history of the program that new members hear so a situation like the one that happened with Indiana are less likely to happen in the future.

Sometimes the structures put in place by the old heads at RapAcademy are too much for the emcees to abide by and they drift away from the program as participating members. This was the case with Indiana; shortly after the incident described above he stopped attending the program. He remains in contact with Mr. Jim through social media and recently thanked him for being a great mentor to him. This was especially validating for Mr. Jim because, “I jumped all over him for the weed in the studio and
then he stopped coming so I thought he was a kid was just lost… apparently not.”

In the process of creating the community of practice that is RapAcademy Mr. Jim has worked through the four dimensions of critical literacy and makes them visible in his practice. He disrupts the commonplace by not taking for granted the privilege that his whiteness affords him, instead interrogating the opportunities that are provided him to stand up and use that privilege for the benefit of the other members of the community in which he is a part. Looking at and understanding personal privilege without action is tantamount to blind acceptance and Mr. Jim strives to work through his privilege and put it to service for others by acknowledging them and working with the emcees to make them visible and encourage them to think about how and why his voice might be heard over theirs in society and work through with them how they get their voices not only heard but respected. Through the conversations about music and life’s experiences that Mr. Jim Shares with the emcees they work through issues that they see in the communities of which they are a part including school, family, city, nation and hip hop. Finally, there is the action for promoting social justice, Mr. Jim is always encouraging the emcees to use their voices as their greatest weapon to fight injustice that they see around them. Jim cannot escape his whiteness so instead he uses it to the full advantage of RapAcademy and the emcees with which he works.

**Hip hop pedagogy and RapAcademy**

While Mr. Jim is quick to say “I just hang out with kids and let them be awesome” there is much more to his philosophy that is lurking below the surface. He has built a
community of practice at RapAcademy that is grounded in working toward social justice, where together he, the other old heads and the emcees create a site of inquiry that encourages all members to interrogate the world around them. The aim is to reside together in a space where they can take up and address social issues that have an impact on their lives in ways that are meaningful to them by affording them the chance to record their feelings and beliefs and share them with an audience at large. He subscribes to the belief of hip hop pioneer DJ Kool Herc, as presented in Rose (2008)

“[K]ids who wanted to rhyme on the microphones at his parties had to find a way to be creative without cursing or promoting violence. These forms of negativity didn’t support the community, and he wouldn’t allow them at his parties. He felt that demanding that kids take a higher path when communicating with their peers was vital to creating the spaces that would support and nourish the community of which he was a part.” (p. 165)

By using hip hop as a vehicle for culturally relevant teaching Mr. Jim has heeded the warning of Gloria Ladson Billings and avoided using popular rap songs as a “gimmick” but instead uses songs that address issues that are present in urban life and the lives of the emcees (Hill, 2009). Not only does Mr. Jim choose songs that will be used as mentor texts as the emcees take up issues they he works closely with the emcees on the creation of their own music that takes up these themes as well. Not only does Mr. Jim avoid the “gimmicky” use of hip hop at RapAcademy he has used popular music as a jumping off point for discussions about why hip hop, as a representation of African American youth and their culture, has become a source of such negative stereotypes. The argument about authenticity in hip hop lyrics (which will be taken up in greater detail in the next chapter) is often brought up as a reason for such negative
messaging but that is frequently met with the counterpoint that if that is all that is ever presented in the music, mainstream commentators and others outside of hip hop will continue to use the music as illustrative of their beliefs about the anti-intellectual or criminal nature of African American youth. Mr. Jim encourages the emcees to use the music as a way to tell the stories that are not being told by popular hip hop as a way to present stories that are intellectually complex as well as authentic (Perry, 2006). Tricia Rose (2008) pointed out that hip hop remains the genre that young people can use to tell their stories when other avenues have been cut off and it is very accessible to young people because there is not a need for a lot of equipment or space in order to participate. In the space created by RapAcademy the emcees are telling these stories. Mr. Jim serves as a facilitator and offers the emcees a space to write and record their music and thus eliminates another barrier that often keeps young people from pursuing recording their music; the money usually necessary to purchase time in a recording studio. Mr. Jim takes up the challenge issued by Marc Lamont Hill (2009) to view young people’s culture as the “stuff” of learning instead something from which they need rescuing. If Mr. Jim was using hip hop as tool of motivation rather than engaging with the culture the students would view this as betrayal or dismissal of their interests (Gustavson, 2007) and the program would be a failure. Instead he works with the emcees to try to work through societal problems and encourage them to take action to speak back and use their voices to prompt change.

Mr. Jim’s desire to deal with issues sometimes creates tension during the sessions.
Approximately one month after Treyvon Martin’s shooting and death, when it was as
the height of national consciousness, with the police chief of Sanford Florida resigning
and many in the media trying to determine if there had been some sort of police cover
up, Mr. Jim wanted to have a discussion with the emcees and have them write a song
allowing them the opportunity to address the issue of how young African Americans are
treated by the police and those representing the law and specifically the feelings elicited
by the shooting death of a young man around their age. The situation had not been
addressed at RapAcademy and Mr. Jim was beginning to think that by neglecting any
conversation about he was doing a disservice to the feelings the students might be
having. All of the old heads at the studio that day were surprised that the emcees were
either not interested or had no idea how contentious the details surrounding the shooting
had become. Mr. Jim and I talked before class and he was very concerned about the
amount of anger the emcees might be feeling about the shooting and he was trying to
figure out the best way to address it, finally deciding the direct approach would be best.

Mr. Jim: Alright gang. I think we should talk about what happened
with Trayvon Martin.

Lyric: who dat?

Mont Magnolia: dag! Don’t you watch the news? That’s the boy
that got shot in Florida. It’s been on TV like all day every day.

Lyric: I don’t watch the news, it’s too sad.

Watching, but not participating in the conversation it reminded me of an earlier
time, during the Saturday morning program, when Mr. Jim, Paul and I had been trying to steer the conversation by using thematically linked songs as mentor texts and expecting the emcees to write topically. At that time, early in the program, we had not developed solid trust with the emcees and they were not ready to share parts of their story with us that they felt were too personal. That was not the case here. The conversation continued:

**Mont Magnolia:** You really don’t know who Trayvon Martin is? They been having like marches and vigils and stuff for him.

**Mr. Jim:** That is why I was thinking about us doing a song.

**Lyric:** Alright, I know who he is, it’s, it’s just too much. It seems like all these people are doing stuff and don’t nobody care that a kid got killed! They just doing it for themselves.

Initially, Lyric tried to act as if she didn’t know who Mr. Jim and the others were talking about as a way of deflecting a conversation that she thought was non-productive at best and self-serving at worst. Lyric went on to tell the group that she stopped paying attention to the news about it because it was “the same old stuff all the time and most of it is probably lies anyway.” She finally decided and let the group know that she wasn’t interested in working on a Trayvon song but did not want to stop them from doing it. Surreptitiously, there was an issue with the recording board and as Mr. Jim left the kids to listen to the beat for the song while he called the studio’s owner to try to fix it, the conversation continued. It seemed that Lyric’s influence was at play even though she said no more on the issue. As the emcees listened to the beat they began to discuss how the beat didn’t really fit the song then a change seemed to come over the group.
Young Tony Beats: I could change the beat up a little make it more you know… change the drums a bit, add a little piano.

Mont Magnolia: Nah man. I think [Lyric] is right man. Maybe it isn’t right to be making a song about this. I mean it is one thing to go to a rally or a vigil but making a song, I don’t know, maybe it ain’t right.

As this conversation was ending, Lady V arrived at the studio and asked what was going on. The emcees explained to her about Mr. Jim’s idea to do a Trayvon Martin song and that after thinking about it, they decided not to do it. She concurred and reminded them that they could address the issues of police brutality and mistreatment of African Americans in the justice system through their music all the time “without capitalizing on another kid’s death.” By the time Mr. Jim returned the emcees had formed a unified front, they didn’t want to record a song. Mr. Jim was disappointed because he thought the kids were missing an opportunity to make a “real statement with a song about something that everyone is talking about,” to which Lady V reminded him responded “we always make real statements with our songs, that is what RapAcademy is all about.”

The conversation that the emcees had, especially when Mr. Jim was not present pointed to the strengths of his educational beliefs in the emcees. It was always meant to be a focal aspect of the program that the emcees would be engaged in critical thinking and create music that was reflective of the types of critical questioning that was encouraged. When Lyric talked about not watching the news she opined that the people delivering the news were probably not telling the truth in their reports. This is especially interesting because this type of distrust for mainstream media will frequently
lead young people to try to discover “truth” in other ways. The type of distrust Lyric showed for network news programs indicates the critical stance she is adopting toward the presentation of “news” and making decisions on her own about the types of media she will engage with and how she receives the information she feels she needs to actively participate in a socially grounded dialogue (Moje, et al., 2008).

Another aspect of the conversation that was important in light of the social justice mission of RapAcademy was the refusal to “capitalize” on the death of a young black man. Over time Mr. Jim has spoken, at length, with the emcees about the corporatization of hip hop and how the people in charge of making the decisions about which songs will make it on to records and make it onto the radio frequently do not have the best interest of the community at large when they make those decisions. By being able to make the decision not to write a Trayvon Martin song, even if it was the idea for the day’s session and having Mr. Jim respect and abide by the decision the class was more successful than Mr. Jim could have hoped. His initial disappointment was replaced with the realization that this session would be a turning point for the emcees who were reminded in a very real way about the power of their voices and the impact that their stories could have on the world.

The interaction between Mr. Jim and the emcees around whether or not to make a song about the shooting of Trayvon Martin and the treatment of African American youth by the police was interesting because it pointed to a larger aspect of Mr. Jim’s pedagogy, specifically the notion that he and his students should be engaged in a
collaborative and reflective process where they co-create the program in which they participate together. Jim points to the SMRC era of the program for offering him the greatest lesson in the need for continuous collaboration between the old heads and the emcees in the program with the goal of always fostering trust. When the program first moved outside of the single school environment, to a studio space, it was opened up to students from schools throughout the city. While the influx of new students brought new energy to the program it also brought a need to develop a new bond of trust between the old heads and the emcees. While there was a great deal of trust for the old heads from the emcees who had previously been involved in the school based program, the new emcees had not developed a trusting relationship with the old heads or the existing emcees. The emcees, old and new, broke the barriers first. With the benefit of a common generation they became friends almost immediately and began communicating with each other outside of the program via text and social media. The road to trust for the adults was not as easily paved. St. Paul, Mr. Jim, and I had thoughtfully created a program that would run from mid-September through mid-December where the emcees would be given CDs that had weekly mentor texts taken from artists across the history of hip-hop music that were connected thematically and asked to write at least one a verse for a song that would be dealing with a similar theme. As Mr. Jim recalled ‘come to Jesus meeting’ and the conversation about writing what is important to the old heads versus what is important to the emcees he informed me that the message was received “loud and clear” and now he works deliberately to ensure that
the emcees have a say in the design of the program and are always involved in decisions about which topics they will be writing. He recalled the two parts of the conversation, the first part that took place inside the studio and was facilitated by a mini revolt as the old heads asked again why none of the emcees had written to the weekly theme. Lady V was the first to speak and summed up the feelings of the group by explaining that themes that we were asking them to write to were either too painful or too personal for sharing at that time. Prior to the session the old heads had been asking the emcees to listen to songs and write thematically about issues like police brutality or the prison industrial complex and its impact on the African-American community and the emcees said that they would rather write songs about what was happening in their schools and their teachers not listening to them. “The session was not productive from a writing standpoint, but after spending the better part of three hours talking about issues that the emcees felt strongly about the program in the long run was much better off.” It was the second part of the conversation that really stuck with Mr. Jim because after the session had finished and the group was preparing to part ways one of the emcees that had been most reluctant to share opened up and told his story, which included all of the themes that the emcees had been asked to write about. Mr. Jim points out that “what was missing was trust, and once the [emcees] felt like they were being listened to, they were willing to share those parts of their stories that were previously too private to share.”

This is an example of the community of practice standing together and using their communal voice to push back against what they felt was a forced effort at justice. They
found their voices in the community and stood together, which was, in and of itself, an act of social justice because they were forcing Mr. Jim and the other old heads to look at the situation from a different perspective and the statement made by the emcees in this moment really demonstrated that they had found their voice and that they were going to be willing and invested members of the community moving forward. As a pedagogue, Mr. Jim strives to be a democratic teacher who invites the students to become co-creators of the curriculum of the program. He embraces the notion that hip hop is a space perfectly suited for open discourse (Perry, 2006) and believes that his role is to encourage the emcees to work toward using their music as a means for challenging listeners to create a just and equal society (Shor, 2011). Hill (2009) points out that in order to be effective practitioners of culturally responsive pedagogy they need learn their students’ cultures and communities and this is exactly what Mr. Jim has done. When talking about the dynamics of regional hip hop in the larger scope of the culture Imani Perry (2006) reminded us that even as hip hop is responsible for helping create a national youth culture, the specificity of home grounds emcees in a particular historic, cultural, and linguistic community. The music that the emcees produce is reflective of this community and Jim works to ensure that the emcees are familiar with the local history of hip hop music with regard to both the program and the hip hop community at large.

During the course of the study Mr. Jim and other old heads were engaged with local hip hop artists, one who is recognized widely as the inventor of gangsta rap and another
a well-known female member of the world wide underground hip hop scene. Making hip hop records since the early days of the industry, they have both had a profound impact on hip hop music as a genre and on RapAcademy as a part of the genre.

The goal of educators is to provide authentic experiences for our students and helping our students make connections between what they are learning and the real world, and working and interacting with true hip hop legends offers the emcees a sense of their place in the history that they might not otherwise have recognized. The relationship with the Gangsta Godfather began, serendipitously, while the members of the program were working on a collaborative song for a video project about the history of the local hip hop scene called the Legacy project. Mr. Jim had been approached by the Legacy project to provide a song for the soundtrack for the documentary of the hip hop scene whose purpose was to give young, aspiring artists and music executives exposure to the rich tradition and musical history of the city and its global influence on Hip-Hop as they create their own pathways to success. The emcees created original music that reflected the 1980s hip hop scene. Mr. Jim had the opportunity to meet Gangsta Godfather at a local establishment and shared with him the work that was being done by RapAcademy. Gangsta Godfather was happy to hear that someone was doing a program for kids using hip hop as a vehicle and, while he was not comfortable working directly with the young emcees during the program, he was willing to share his seminal beat, with permission, so Mr. Jim and the emcees could use it as the basis for their original music which would be included on the soundtrack. Underground OG was more
giving of her time and spent several sessions with the emcees, talking about music creation and lyric writing. Her involvement was especially important to the young women in the program that were able to meet a woman that had been making hip hop at a high level for longer than any of the RapAcademy emcees had been alive. Lyric expressed her appreciation for the opportunity to meet the legendary rapper noting, “it was cool, I mean, Mr. Jim shared some of her music with us when he found out she was going to come and it was hot. She doesn’t rap like a lot of other women and that is kind of the same style I have, so it was great to know that she has been so successful and that I could be too.”

There have been several other members of the local hip hop scene that have participated with the program and while they may not be as well known as Gangsta Godfather and Underground OG they have had a tremendous impact on the program. Coming from a city with a rich hip hop tradition the local hip hop community has embraced the work being done by Blackboard Labs. Like Gangsta Godfather, a well-known local producer donated the rights to one of his songs in order for the RapAcademy emcees to record vocals over. In addition to working with other artists during the group sessions the emcees from RapAcademy have done many collaborative shows with local artists as well.

By embracing members of the larger hip hop community in the work that is being done at RapAcademy the community of practice is strengthened. By engaging with and learning from pioneering artist in hip hop culture the participants at RapAcademy
enhanced their shared repertoire which allowed them to grow together building their domain (Wenger, 2006). Interacting with professionals hip hop artists also gave gravitas to the project that the emcees were engaging in and encouraged them to continue to bring to light the societal issues that they felt needed addressing.

Mr. Jim aims to embrace the theory of literocracy (Fischer, 2005), a concept that connects the democratic principles of student choice and action to the practice of literacy. Mr. Jim recalls early iterations of the program when the old heads would provide written lyrics and digital recordings of mentor texts for the emcees to read and analyze between meetings with the goal of producing new songs that addressed the week’s theme that were less than successful. Over time Mr. Jim shifted his instruction focus from a teacher structured and thematically based class set-up to a space for the emcees “to come hang out and talk about the things that are on their minds, [t]hen they turn that into music that they can share with their friends and family” (Crozier-Fitzgerald, 2012). The concept of literocracy also affords the students a great deal of control as to what takes place in the program and the opportunity to share their thoughts and ideas about their own work as well as the work of others in a safe space. Mr. Jim believes that the program is running most smoothly when “I get to sit back and let the kids teach each other” (interview) and that when “I watch them interact with one another and care enough to help one another improve” he can really feel the community developing around him (Crozier-Fitzgerald, 2012). This type of peer leadership has become a hallmark of RapAcademy with students taking a larger role in the
instructional process, serving as critical friends for both the writing and the flow of their comrades’ lyrical production. It is not unusual for emcees to seek this help out, asking a peer for assistance during the writing process before they even take it to Mr. Jim or one of the other adults. In addition to the lyrical side of the process there is the music production side as well where many of the emcees are taking the initiative to learn about the beat making software and creating beats collaboratively to which the emcees will write their songs. Mont Magnolia to a special interest in the area of recording production and began working the production board for the recording sessions, essentially freeing Mr. Jim up to serve in other areas of the program that he had typically been restricted from participating once recording would start each session.

Mont’s proficiency as a sound engineer was developmental, but his excellence as a peer motivator was evident the first time he sat in the chair. Mr. Jim was coaching him on how to use the production board in a live recording session and another emcee was in the booth delivering his lyrics and had flubbed his rhymes several times. Normally, if an emcee makes a mistake at the same point of the song the engineer can take the best take that they had done to that point clip it at the flub and have the emcee start again from where the mistake happened and then splice the two takes together in post-production.

In this instance, the emcee, Young Tony Beats, whose participation to this point had been restricted mostly to beat making because he lacked the confidence to rap, was getting very frustrated with himself and the recording process when the following exchange happened.
Young Tony Beats: man forget it I keep messin’ up

Mont Magnolia: c’mon do it again

Young Tony Beats: nah I think I’m just done

Mont Magnolia: Yo man, we all know you make sick beats now it’s time to show what you can do with a mic. C’mon you got this!

The other participants caught onto Mont’s encouraging words and joined in expressing their belief in Young Tony’s ability to perform his rhymes. Bolstered by the show of confidence he took a few deep breaths and agreed to try again. On this attempt he laid the vocals flawlessly and was received back in the engineering room like a conquering hero with all of the participants giving him high fives and confirming that they “knew all along” he could do it. When Mont played it back for him and he heard how well he performed the smile couldn’t be wiped from his face. He thanked Mont for believing in him and not letting him quit. Mr. Jim would say later that for him that was the greatest moment because “the kids didn’t even need us to be in the studio, they handled the whole situation by themselves.”

This exchange demonstrates the attributes of mutual engagement and joint enterprises that are so important to the development of communities of practice. Mont Magnolia and the other emcees not only demonstrated collegiality toward young Tony Beats, but they encouraged him to demonstrate the skills that they knew he possessed.

By embracing what many in education would consider counterliteracies, practices outside of traditional academic literacies (Low, 2010), Mr. Jim and the other oldheads
recognize the importance of popular culture as a site of knowledge and expertise about their own lives that the students bring to the fore in their lyrics, conversations, and interactions with one another and the adults that they work with in the program. This is one of the ways that the participants engaged in the building of the community of practice, by looking at their existing knowledge and engaging in a dialogue as to the meanings and messages that they and others were presenting through their music (Darren, 2005). Through their music the emcees are able to craft their message in ways that are not always welcome in school settings. Mr. Jim employs the “paradox of caring but not caring” (Marquet, 2012) which means that he thinks first about what is best for the emcees and how they want to express themselves rather than how those expressions might be received by the greater society at large. This standard was expressed by Mr. Jim at meeting with new emcees who were joining the program. He delivered a composition book that was to serve as their rhyme book and explained his expectations and rules to the new participants:

**Mr. Jim:** Each of you is being given a rhyme book that you can write your lyrics in. You can write whatever you want in this book and neither I nor any other adult in the program will tell you that it is wrong or that you are not able to express yourself using whatever language you want, the only thing that we ask is that when you record you make the lyrics radio friendly.

The emcees are teenagers whose identities are still developing and, as such, they frequently play with new identity markers. They do this, generally, through language usage and by adopting different tones, personas, and cadences in their lyrical representation. Because of the rules about the use of language in the writing it was a
short jump to using language (slang and cursing) that many adults would find inappropria
t during the workshop portion of the program. It is not unusual for there to be observers from outside groups and the students know, pragmatically, that they should clean up their language when these people are visiting. Mr. Jim is comfortable with letting them use language in any way that they want conversationally and in their lyric writing as long as the emcees find ways to create songs that would be considered appropriate for radio play. On more than one occasion Mr. Jim has asked an emcee “would you want to share these lyrics with your grandmother?” which usually leads to an admission by the emcee that they may be using language that is detrimental to getting their message across in a positive way.

One of the most interesting conversations about the use of language, and another example of literocracy and an example of interrogating multiple viewpoints, happened around the use of the n-word in the music. As with any other language it was able to be written in the rhyme books of the emcees but there had always been a line drawn in the sand around the use of the n-word in the recorded music. When the program began in a school based setting, the students were prohibited from using the n-word in their lyrics because it was determined to be unacceptable language by school policy. The administration of the school felt that use of the n-word, despite arguments to the contrary, could and should not be uses as a term of endearment or colloquial familiarity with one another. In addition, it caused a level of discomfort for the facilitators of the program, many of whom were not African-American. This policy continued as the
program moved through its various changes until one session when the emcees were sharing what they had written. At the session there were four emcees, Mr. Jim, and the parents of two of the emcees. After listening to a verse performed by Young Tony Beats the following conversation took place.

**Mr. Jim:** I think that verse is really good but you will have to take the n-word out when you record.

**Momma Beats:** Can I ask a question?

**Mr. Jim:** Of course.

**Momma Beats:** Why is the word nigga prohibited? Why are they allowed to write it but not allowed to record it?

**Mr. Jim:** We have just always had a rule that the [emcees] could write whatever they wanted in their rhyme books, but that offensive words would be taken out for recording.

**Momma Beats:** I understand that for cursing, I am just not sure that I agree with the word nigga as being offensive.

**Mr. Jim:** Also, I am just personally not very comfortable with the word.

**Momma Beats:** Well isn’t it used by rappers that you listen to? From my perspective, I just don’t think it is negative when [YTB] and other black people use it. In fact, because I know you and how you act with the kids, I wouldn’t be upset if you used the term because I know it wouldn’t be negative.

**Mr. Jim:** Well, I am still not going to use it because I don’t think it is appropriate, but I guess if that is what everybody thinks, then as long as it is not used lazily and we all understand that I have final veto power it can be used, in moderation.

Despite his discomfort with the n-word, Mr. Jim was willing to listen to the points-of-view of the emcees and their parents with regards to the issue. As stipulated
the use of the word has not been allowed to become lazy and is always interrogated
when it is used in lyrics to see if it works in service of the message that the emcee is
trying to convey. It is clear that the emcees have a great deal of respect for Mr. Jim and
do not want to take advantage of a situation with which he has already expressed his
discomfort. As Lyric puts it,

“[Mr. Jim] is real cool, like, I mean, he gonna let us say what we want and
letting us use the n-word was a big deal because that had always been one
of the things that we never did at RapAcademy. Some of us would find
other places to record if we was gonna use it but now we think more about
when and where we use it our music. It’s not like most of those other
rappers out there that be using it all the time, you know, it like has to mean
something when you say it.”

Lyric viewed Mr. Jim, despite his misgivings, conceding the use of the n-word as
a sign of respect to the emcees because he was giving them the opportunity to determine
whether or not it was really important to getting across the point they were trying to
make with their music. Lady V was very thoughtful in her response,

“I think that maybe he is letting them express themselves. Blacks, especially
youth want to take it back and take the –er off to assume that they are using it to
uplift themselves from the oppressor. Me personally, I don’t really like using it.
But I understand both sides, the whole uplifting and the other side of it still not
changing the fact that nigga/nigger is still oppressive.”

It seems that the emcees recognize that the use of language has consequences and
they take responsibility for use of language very seriously and there have been very few
instances since where Mr. Jim has overruled a student and cut the n-word from a song
and he identifies most of those instances for “clean edits only,” or for the purposes of
making the song radio friendly while original or album cuts would remain original to
the intent of the emcee. In fact, Mr. Jim has begun letting the emcees record two versions of their songs, one, which stays true to the ideals of the program and does not include the use of the n-word and one, that the emcees can have for themselves that does. He reports that if he “doesn’t make them change the lyrics during the recording process then he doesn’t change them during final edits. The issue around the use of the n-word is especially interesting to look at because of Mr. Jim’s racial background.

There is always an underlying tension, sometimes palpable other times less visible, because Jim is a white man teaching and working with kids through hip hop music and his beliefs about the types of language that are appropriate for use in the program, but in this instance he disrupted his own norm by acquiescing and allowing the emcees to use the language that they wanted to use even though he found it objectionable.

This classroom is not a classroom.

There are so many things happening within the theoretical and actual space that is occupied by Blackboard Labs. The old heads, and specifically Mr. Jim, strive to create a space which the emcees can feel safe and appreciated for the types of knowledge they bring with them to the conversation in which they engage together. This could not happen if they were not willing to really engage with the hip hop culture that forms the foundation of their work. Being culturally relevant teachers they strive to make intellectual and social connections with each other and their students (Ladson-Billings, 1994). In so doing, they start by recognizing and acknowledging their privileged status and the differences between themselves and their students – regardless of how similar
they want to believe they are – before they can focus on those similarities (Cardinal, 2004). This work leads to them being able to serve as mentors for the emcees and lead a program that focuses on hip hop as a liberatory practice and not just a pedagogical tool to try to trick students into engagement, but rather a way of encouraging a critical participation in society that will provide the emcees with opportunities to develop into the types of leaders their communities need. By virtue of being situated outside of the school day and drawing participants from several schools throughout the city, RapAcademy occupies a unique position where there are expectations for the participants without the potentially punitive punishments that seem to always be hanging over school based afterschool programs.

**More than a mentor**

Typically, the program cannot operate if Mr. Jim cannot attend. For every session he brings, sets up, and largely operates the recording equipment. Since the program meets in a school governed by the local school district, it adheres to the district’s schedule meeting on those days when school is in session and unable to meet when the district has a scheduled day off. On rare occasions, Mr. Jim has to cancel a session for reasons other than schedule related issues and when he does his relationship with the emcees becomes evident. On a few occasions he had to cancel because his health prevented him from being able to be present and participate. When he is forced to cancel a session he gives as much advanced warning as possible, via a social media message board, so the emcees do not begin their trips from all parts of the city to the
school and he always explains why he is cancelling. With notification of cancellation the emcees will usually acknowledge receipt of the message and send well wishes like “ok cool,” feel better,” “see you next week,” or “hope you feel better,” but on the occasion when the reason for cancelling was not Mr. Jim’s health, but rather the health of his father the tone of the responses changed dramatically, indicating the care and concern of the young people for Mr. Jim as evidenced by the following message thread:

Mr. Jim – Hey all I’m very sorry but I need to cancel class today – my father has been in the hospital since Thursday after suffering his fourth stroke. I need to spend today in the hospital with my family. When you see this please text around to the others to make sure that everyone gets the message.

Be well

Jim

Zionhie – I hope everythings okay Jim (concerned emoji)

Joslyn – keep your head up Jim you got us if you need anything

Nasir – Yea Jim keep your head held high and will do (ok fingers and alien emoji)

Joel – Dang Jim … my condolences (sad emoji)

The relationship that has developed between Mr. Jim and the concern of the emcees for their mentor and friend is evident. The loving nature of the relationship between Mr. Jim and the emcees is reciprocal. Mr. Jim revels in the successes of the emcees and supports them in their endeavors outside of RapAcademy. He has attended graduations, student rallies where one of the emcees spoke, and has gone out of his way to visit stores where emcees were working in retail. While it is easy to be supportive when
things are going well for the emcees, Mr. Jim has remained supportive when some of
the emcees have gone through tougher times as well. He has stood by the emcees when
they have made poor choices. Lyric recalls, “man when I got arrested (for a violent
fight that took place in school) Mr. Jim was really there for me. As soon as I got out he
was texting me to make sure that I was ok.” While sending a text might not seem like
the most consequential action in a situation like that it let Lyric know that she had
someone that was looking out for her. Lyric has not always had great relationships with
adults and that he was still willing to stand behind her meant a lot to her. Upon
reflection she continued, “I ain’t never doin’ nothin’ to go to jail again. I was there for
two days and I’m never goin’ back. I know Mr. Jim was probably mad that I got myself
in trouble like that - but he never made me feel like it.” It further demonstrated to all of
the emcees that Mr. Jim was primarily concerned about them and that even if they made
mistakes (small or large) he was not going to give up on them.

Mr. Jim, as the creator of this community of practice cares very much for its
development and the development of the individual participants. Throughout the history
of the program cultural practices have been developed and nurtured by him, but at the
fore is the concern for the personal and ‘professional’ growth that the members have for
one another. This is one of the hallmarks of communities of practice (Lave &Wenger,
1991) and it is evident in the work that Mr. Jim does with RapAcademy.
The other Old Heads

While Mr. Jim was certainly the most consistent adult participant, others participated during the time of the study and their impact was equally impactful to the emcees. The community of practice benefits from the experiences and expertise of other oldheads as well. They are able to participate in ways that even Mr. Jim. Ultimately Mr. Jim is responsible for the success or failure of the program and the professional connections that were made to afford it the luxury of being in the studio and can’t ever afford to just go with the flow in ways that the other oldheads can. There is also the issue that the African American oldheads share a cultural background with the students that Mr. Jim doesn’t which lends them a certain amount of credibility no matter their other qualifications because the emcees look at them and know that they knowe what it is like to be Black in America. Mont Magnolia was impressed that “these grown-ups come here and hang out with us and help us make music.” It was not unusual for there to be as many as six oldheads at a session, which on more than one occasion was equal to or greater than the number of emcees in attendance. Each of the old heads brought an area of expertise to bear on the program and by virtue of collaboration contributed to the development of emcees throughout the course of the study.

Each of the adults came to the program in different ways but almost all through some connection to Mr. Jim. Ms. Alli, who is the wife of one of Mr. Jim’s childhood friend’s heard him excitedly relaying the work that he was doing with the emcees and wanted “to get involved,” which led her to begin participating in the SMRC. While she
initially wanted to bring her particular artistic element to the program (photography), it
never really gripped the emcees, but Ms. Alli was attracted to continuing to work with
them in the realm of music production. As Lady V pointed out, “her photography aspect
was nice but it was nice to have a grown-up female in the program.” The presence of
female old heads cannot be overstated. There are some times when young women want
to commiserate with older women. Lyric recalled the class meeting after an argument
that took place in a Facebook chat room saying, “Ms. Alli wasn’t around a lot but it was
a good thing she was there that day, she really helped keep the situation calm.”

This is also one of the strengths of having Lucky participate as a mentor. Both of
these women were very comfortable in their own skin and were willing to share their
stories with the emcees in order to develop trust. Lucky brings to the program personal
and professional insights which were especially impactful. Professionally, she works as
a social worker at a women’s abuse center in a community outside of the city and is not
hesitant to check emcees if she believes their lyrics might be harmful or misogynistic.
As a lesbian, she also serves as a model for some of the emcees and their friends who
are also gay. While the emcees are comfortable sharing what is troubling them with any
of the adults in the program, Lucky has insight into the kinds of issues that the young
women are dealing with as they become comfortable with themselves and their
relationships that straight men or even straight women do not. Mr. Jim recalls that when
Lucky first contacted him about volunteering he put her off because the old head to
emcee ration on Mondays was such that many days there were as many old heads as
there were emcees but, because of work, Brian had to scale back and he asked Lucky to come in and “she loved it from the beginning, the kids loved her and that she was a good fit.”

Brian and Antwan began their participation as a team. Mr. Jim knew Brian from a restaurant where they worked together and the two had been talking about music and Mr. Jim shared the work that he was doing with RapAcademy. Brian, who had recorded his own music as a youth, was very interested in the work of the emcees and when Mr. Jim had let him hear some of the songs that the emcees had done his interest in the program increased. Not actually knowing the full extent of Brian’s musical background but “[liking] him as a person” Mr. Jim invited him to come to a session. Antwan, an audio engineer and music producer, was interested in what was happening at RapAcademy after talking with Brian and came with him to the first session. Mr. Jim describes both Brian and Antwan as “really good with the kids.” Expanding on this point he described them as “nurturing but not coddling” and acknowledged that observing them reminded him that “calling the kids out on their bullshit does not mean you are being mean to them.” Lady V explained their participation with the emcees best when she relayed that “they were able to talk to us in a relatable manner.”

Most impressive as the community grows is the ways in which the emcees welcome new members into the community of practice. They believe that if you are there for the right reasons – to connect with people and engage in the work being done by the community then you will be welcome.
Conclusion

Each of the old heads involved with the program came to it through different means and with different levels of experience, both with hip hop and working with young people, but made an effort to share their talents with RapAcademy thus improving on the existing community of practice. By participating in the community’s social practices and goals and helping to grow the organization they are vital to the life blood of the program. Clearly the emcees recognized the strengths of the old heads and used them as the resources that they were. Over the course of the study the relationships between the emcees and the oldheads became more solidified and the level of trust that each enjoyed on the word of Mr. Jim became more legitimate as time passed. There was evidence that the communal bonds developed between the two groups and the relationships that developed strengthened the group as a whole. It is interesting that new adults are afforded a level of respect by the emcees based on positive recommendation of the old heads because it is much the same when the emcees bring new kids to the program.
CHAPTER 5
JUMPING IN THE CYPHA: EMCEES JOIN THE CONVERSATION

The last chapter focused on the “old heads,” their participation in the program and how they help to develop the community of practice. This chapter will focus on the emcees and the ways in which they work with each other and the old heads to make the literacy community that is RapAcademy work. As a community of practice there is quite a bit of interaction that takes place in the program with regards to its development and in which projects the group decides to participate. When opportunities are presented to Mr. Jim he brings them to the group and they decide together whether or not they want to participate. Throughout the history of RapAcademy there have been over two dozen emcees who have participated and, for a variety of reasons, their tenures have ranged from as few as two sessions to consistent participation until they reached the end of their eligibility at the age of nineteen. In this chapter, I will look more closely at the emcees, the ways in which they have participated in the program and the ways that their participation changed across time. In addition to the emcees, several additional youth participants occupied the communal space for varying lengths of time. I will also look at the ways their contributions impacted the practices of the community.

Hip hop is generally thought to be the domain of young African American males, with the majority of the lyrics heard in mainstream presenting stories of hyper-masculinity and hyper-sexuality. Across the history of program there have been an approximately equal number of male and female participants and while women are
typically viewed as hip hop’s second class citizens, they have not at RapAcademy. Gwendolyn Pough (2004) refuted Nelson George’s (1998) argument that hip-hop’s overall development would have been no different with or without the contributions of female emcees. Without female emcees RapAcademy would not exist. As pointed out in the chapter that focused on the history of the program from its beginnings there was a decidedly female presence. It is for this reason that I am choosing to start the chapter about the emcees by looking at the female emcees that participate in RapAcademy. One of the salient points about having both male and female emcees and oldheads participating is it that it afforded all of the participants to interrogate multiple viewpoints and really look at the ways people are silenced in the greater culture of hip hop and work to affect a positive change in the culture through their music and through their greater realizations of the things that are taking place in society in general.

**Ladies first**

A great deal of the work that has been done about hip hop music focuses on how African American males use it and females assume a secondary, at best, role in the culture. There have been works which have examined and promoted the importance of women’s roles in hip hop (Pough 2004; Sharpley-Whiting, 2007; Morgan & Neal, 2007; Rose, 2008) but far more emphasis has been put on looking at how hip hop and specifically rap music is taken up by men. As Sharpley-Whiting (2007) points out while discussing the explosive growth of hip hop over the past thirty years she reminds us that it still remains largely the voice for youth who feel alienated and disaffected in
mainstream society. This becomes a larger problem where it concerns young African American women because they are alienated not only by mainstream society but frequently by hip-hop as well. Pough (2004) pointed out that most examinations of rap music and hip-hop culture critique rap as a masculine discursive space and seldom look at black women’s experiences within that space. While there is a decidedly male presence in BBL, I have decided to begin this chapter by intentionally focusing on female emcees, specifically Lady V and Lyric. I have not chosen them simply because I wanted to focus on female emcees but rather because over the course of time they have come to demonstrate themselves as leaders and mentor for the other emcees. Each of these young women have assumed leadership roles over the course of the program and embraced the project of using their music as an outlet for dealing with personal and larger societal issues and thereby serve as models for newer participants.

**Who is running this show?**

While the ages of the emcees range from thirteen to nineteen, some who are chronologically younger are actually programmatically more experienced. This leads to an interesting type of programmatic intergenerationality that is reminiscent of the tri-level role modeling put forth by Deutsch (2011) where older members “receive the needed support from the adults while serving as role models to younger club members” (2011). This intergenerationality is common in communities of practice where knowledge of the community is passed on as one generation of participants replaces another (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Lyric who has been a member of Blackboard Labs
for five years and is the most tenured of the currently participating emcees describes the process when she says “sometimes even though you might be younger you already done stuff here that the new people are just getting to and you can help them because you been there.” A grand conversation took place between the emcees when braggadocio seemed to get out of hand and feelings were hurt. During the subsequent conversation one emcee started to become belligerent toward the others, using pejorative terms and continuing to goad the others by questioning their talent and challenging them personally. Lyric tried to remind the group that the purpose of participating in RapAcademy was to get away from the type of negativity that was being displayed. Mr. Jim has a complimentary philosophy believing that it is “important for the kids to know that if they are going to step up and lead that I, and the other adults in the program, have got their back.” That doesn’t mean that he will allow the emcees to handle their issues without intervention if he believes that it is necessary, but rather that he will allow the emcees to handle it themselves if they are able. The emcees do not always comport themselves with the maturity and professionalism that Mr. Jim and the others hope they will and, as a result have conversations and interactions that put one or more of them on the defensive and the results. An example of this happened one evening, in a chat room that was set up specifically for the members of RapAcademy, when an emcee scolded two others because he was unhappy about receiving notifications about a conversation that he thought would be more appropriate elsewhere. As the chat became increasingly negative some emcees tried to calm the tone while others continued to escalate the
rhetoric or goad others into the argument. Lyric tried to remind the group of why they started participating in the first place. While acknowledging the point the other emcee was making she was clear in her position when she told him “everybody ain’t you, everybody didn’t go through the shit you went through! I’ve been through hell and back and still come to RapAcademy with a smile on my face every Monday. I come to the studio to get away from the shit that’s going on in the streets and my fam and my head!”

Despite her best intentions, the argument continued and she stopped participating, not wanting to engage in any more negativity. In the aftermath of the argument several steps were taken to try to ensure that it would not happen again. Being a part of the group the old heads were privy to the conversation, though not in real time, and began messaging privately discussing what should be done about the situation. It was determined that each of the participants in the conversation would need to be spoken to individually and the following Monday there would need to be a group conversation to clear up any lingering issues.

It was interesting to watch the meeting unfold because the old heads didn’t have to mediate in ways that might be expected. When everybody arrived the following Monday Mr. Jim announced, “before we get started today we are going to have to talk about what happened the other night.” While beginning the conversation Jim apologized for not being involved while it was happening explaining that he was “away from [his] computer and didn’t have [his] phone, so [he] wasn’t able to get the texts that [the emcees] were sending [him].” Raw D recalled a text that he sent to Mr. Jim where
he said, “where are you we need you man.” That is when Ideal mentioned that he texted Lyric asking her to get involved. She recalled “he texted me like three times saying I had to go on Facebook and I was like I’m not ready for this.” She then recounted looking at the conversation and having to go back and read “like an hour’s worth of arguing” before she could respond at all. I found this aspect of her response very mature as the argument was taking place between a friend of hers, whom she had brought to the program, and one of the newer members with whom she had not yet developed a relationship. It would have been easy for her to immediately jump to the defense of her friend (as other members of the group had which caused the escalation in the first place), but that was not the tack she took, instead taking in the whole picture before engaging and, when she finally did, admonishing all of the participants for their behavior and reminding them about why they participate in RapAcademy in the first place. While the incident and the conversation that followed were at times uncomfortable it became clear that this was a real community of practice, not just a bunch of kids that like hip hop and hang out together and make music, but rather a group that was committed to their growth together and doing the work that needed to be done to be strong together moving forward. Together they worked through the unpleasantness of the online chat and got to a place where they were more trusting of one another and understood more clearly how they valued the program and the participation of the members in it (Darren, 2005).

In the previous chapter I mentioned Mr. Jim’s embrace of the philosophy of
Literocracy and as evidenced by the example above it is something that he takes very seriously, letting the emcees take a great deal of responsibility, both personally and communally for the direction of the program. Another example of how Mr. Jim shares control with the emcees is in the projects with which he associates RapAcademy. Mr. Jim is frequently approached by people in the city’s hip hop community that recognize the power of the work he is doing with the emcees and want to develop a relationship or partner in some way with RapAcademy. While most adults that are responsible for the administration of a youth program would feel comfortable making agreements, Mr. Jim shares information about the opportunities with the emcees and gets their feedback before he makes any decisions. Mr. Jim has worked with adolescents, and these adolescents in particular, long enough to know that “if they are not into it they will not put forth full effort.” His willingness to share this decision making with the emcees is not lost on them. Lyric relates, “we have gotten to do some really cool things because of Mr. Jim, like when we did that song for the documentary, he asked us if we wanted to do it he didn’t just say we would.” By asking the emcees if they want to participate he gives the opportunity for conversation and further opportunities for leadership by the emcees when they have to advocate for why they want to participate in the activity or not.

**That’s the kind of girl I want down with my team**

Mr. Jim and the other old heads have a tremendous amount of respect for Lady V and Lyric as both artists and as young people. As discussed in the previous chapter, the
emcees have a great deal of respect for Mr. Jim and the other Old Heads that help him facilitate the program. What is evident to the emcees is that the respect shown is also given to all of the emcees but Lady V and Lyric, lifers in the program, are seen as the primary leaders of the emcees. As Mr. Jim points out “early on, most of the kids that came to the program came because of Lady V, either they were friends with her or they heard the music she was making and wanted to be involved also.” Lyric was the first emcee from outside of Lady V’s immediate circle of influence to join the program and first became a part of Lady V’s crew before inviting people she knew to participate in the program. Mr. Jim identified Lyric as the program’s “best recruiter” because she has and continues to bring new and diverse participants into the program describing her influence “like a web” where she invited a new emcee and he invited a few more and the numbers of participants grew even as attrition was leading others to stop. It is this bringing in of new emcees that has solidified Lyric’s place as a peer leader as well.

Having a historical background of the program and a fierce desire to protect its mission (RapAcademy initiates social change by empowering urban youth through innovative creative arts programming rooted in hip-hop culture.), Lyric will not let anyone “mess with RapAcademy without [her] telling them about it.” Lyric takes her responsibility as a leader at RapAcademy seriously and her desire to honor the mission of RapAcademy has manifested itself through the production of her music as well. She will only make music at RapAcademy that she believes matches with the mission and pays for studio space elsewhere to create music that she feels does not align. As she explained,
“sometimes I got stuff that I want to say that wouldn’t work at RapAcademy, I mean, Mr. Jim would be cool with it and all, it just wouldn’t feel right doing it there. Plus, the others would start to think that they could cut up too.” It is this level of maturity that has earned her the respect of old heads and emcees alike.

The leadership responsibilities that Lady V and Lyric take on within the program are emblematic of growth in a community of practice and characteristic of members that have spent time and invested energy into developing the community. Thiers knowledge of the community is grounded in experience and comes from being involved with the program as it developed culturally. That they are willing to share the insights gained over time with new generations of participants speaks to how important the social justice work of RapAcademy is to them.

Mr. Jim marvels at the transformation that he has seen in Lyric from the time she began the program noting, “she has just grown so much, not only as a lyricist and performer but as a person. She is not the same kid that came to the SMRC that first day.” Lyric has changed considerably since her early days in the program. When she began she was far less confident in her ability to present her messages even though they were impactful. It seemed that for the first several sessions she was trying to figure out the group dynamic and wasn’t ready to fully engage, which she explained, “I was so little back then and I didn’t know nobody it was crazy, but then [Lady V] and I started hanging out and she became my big sister.” Lady V remembers it the same way, “when [Lyric] started coming she was so young but it was clear that she had skills. She wasn’t
afraid to say what she was thinking and expressing the pain that she was feeling in her life. I started talking to her so she would feel more comfortable and then we started hanging out outside of BBL.” Lady V never let the difference in age impact the relationship that they had as is Lyric is the same age as Lady V’s younger sister fell easily into the big sister role. She recalled “she started hanging out at our house and would hang out with [my sister] when I wasn’t there and soon it was like she was another part of the family.” Mr. Jim and Lady V are not the only members of the group to recognize the role that Lyric plays in the community, Mont Magnolia shared his respect for Lyric also saying “[she] is just always ready. She knows what she has to say is hot and by being prepared she forces everyone else to be prepared also because if they are not she is going to get in the booth and they aren’t.”

It is one thing for Lyric and Lady V to be respected because of their leadership, but in hip hop respect ultimately comes down to whether or not an emcee has skills (verbal acuity and lyrical strength) and they both do. Through their lyrics they have accepted the challenge of Gwendelyn Pough (2004) and harnessed the energy and activist roots of hip-hop culture and rap music to claim a public voice for themselves. Frequently, female voices are forced to play a role that is secondary to the males who dominate the genre but, both Lyric and Lady V will not take a back seat to anyone and truly “bring wreck” (Pough, 2004) when challenging the very nature of mainstream hip hop music. These young women hold a special place in the program as well because they worked to fill the typically invisible space of strong, positive, female voices in hip hop.
In addition to the many new emcees Lyric brought to the program, she would have friends that had no interest, at least initially, in making music that would sometimes come and hang out just to hang out. It speaks to the nature of providing a safe space and welcoming community for urban adolescents that there were frequently as many four non-emcees that wanted to just be there to support their friends and hang out. Some of these friends eventually came to make music after observing the process and realizing they had something that they wanted to record, others simply hung out and supported their new friends, listening and giving feedback, as they worked on new music. Over time these friends who I have always just called ‘the posse’ came to be fully participating non-emcees, developing relationships with the old heads akin to the ones being developed by the emcees.

One of these posse members that took full advantage of the relationship with the old heads was Keera, a friend of Lyric’s who had no interest in recording. She would come to the studio every Monday and would usually hang out with the emcees while they were working on beats or writing rhymes. However, one day she was hanging out in the production suite with some of the old heads (Brian, Antwan and me) when she asked if she could talk to us.

Keera: I’ve got this problem and I’m not sure what to do.

Brian: What’s going on?

Keera: Well I’m gay… you knew I was gay right? And I’m not sure if I should tell my grandmother.

This was the beginning of an interesting conversation. We knew that Lyric
identified as a lesbian and many of her friends were also lesbians, but to that point the
old heads had never had a conversation with or about any of the emcees about their
sexuality in a group setting and here was one of the non-emcee participants pulling back
the curtain on her life for us. That she came to us for advice was a real turning point.
The three of us spent a few minutes talking to Keera and then Brian and Antwan
returned to the work of and Keera and I continued the conversation about her
grandmother. This was the exact kind of work we always imagined the emcees would
be taking part in when we created the program. It was always intended to be a safe
space where students could interrogate and talk to the issues that they were seeing in
their lives and here was a young woman who was participating in the program and not
using a microphone to communicate the biggest issue in her life. As illustrated in the
following interaction she was really talking herself into telling her grandmother and she
wanted to know that someone else agreed with her that it was the right thing to do.

    **Keera:** My grandmom is a church lady and I’m not sure how she gonna react.

    **PC:** Is it possible that she already knows?

    **Keera:** She might, I mean I used to go with this boy, but I’ve been talking to [my
girlfriend] lately and my grandmom keeps telling me to stay away from her.

    **PC:** Why does she not want you hanging out with her?

    **Keera:** Because everyone around my way knows she’s gay and my grandmom
don’t want people thinking I’m gay.

    **PC:** So do you think that your grandmother really doesn’t want everybody else
thinking you’re gay or that she is afraid that you are gay.

    **Keera:** Probably both.
**PC:** So, what would happen if you told her?

**Keera:** That’s the thing… I don’t know. I live with her, I have since I was six and my mom left and I’m not sure if she will put me out if I tell her.

We spent several minutes talking about what her grandmother might already know and how she has been treating her recently with Keera revealing that she was “pretty sure” that her grandmother knew and that she wasn’t treating her any differently than she always had. For my part, I let her talk about the things that she wanted to do and how she no longer wanted to hide this part of her life from her grandmother. Her two biggest concerns seemed to be that her grandmother would be disappointed or think that she did something wrong and that she would tell Keera that she could no longer live with her and she would have to find somewhere else to live, which she kept coming back around to in different ways.

**Keera:** If she did kick me out I could probably go live with my aunt. I could live with [my girlfriend’s] family. Her mom knows that we are together and she is cool with it but I think it would really hurt my grandmom if I did that.

**PC:** Do you think that she would care where you went if she kicked you out?

**Keera:** No doubt. She loves me and would worry.

**PC:** I think you may have just answered your own question. It is obvious that you feel like you are lying to your grandmother and you don’t like the feeling, if you have a plan for where you can stay if the worst happens I think you should tell her. That way, at least your conscience will be at ease.

**Keera:** It’s just such a hard decision; I’m still not sure what I am going to do.

I finished the conversation by telling her that RapAcademy would be meeting every Monday and that I and the other old heads would be willing to keep talking about it if
she wanted. She let me know that she appreciated all the time that I spent talking to her and that she would let me know what happened. The following week she came into the production suite immediately upon arriving thanked us again for listening the week before and told us (Brian, Mr. Jim and I) that she had, in fact, told her grandmother and was surprised when her grandmother told her she already knew and wondered if Keera would ever tell her. A few weeks later Keera missed a session which Lyric told us was because of detention. She missed the following week as well and when we asked Lyric if she knew why she just shrugged her shoulders and said “I don’t know she didn’t say anything to me. Keera never returned to RapAcademy but the program was definitely there for her when she needed it the most. Later, Lyric would tell me that once her grandmother knew about her girlfriend “she just was all about that girl and didn’t want to hang out with nobody else.” Over the course of the study there where a few other posse members that would come through the doors, stay for a few weeks and then disappear again while others would float in and out. If the presence of these transient participants bothered any of the regulars nobody ever made it known.

In many ways this example is illustrative of RapAcademy acting as a community of practice that was critically engaging with the world of this particular non-emcee. That Keera was willing to engage in the conversation with trusted members of the community speaks volumes to the strength of it. Together we worked through the dimensions of critical literacy by interrogating the very situation of her life that at the time was most confounding to her. By looking at the situation through a variety
viewpoints (Lewison, Leland, & Harste, 2008) we offered he an opportunity to talk through an issue, thereby encouraging her to disrupt the commonplace of her own life and beliefs about her grandmother in an effort to facilitate the eventual change that took place for her. The unknown consequence of the conversation was that Keera no longer needed the safety of the community and moved on.

**Not everyone fits**

As noted above it was not unusual for new people to be in attendance and frequently people would become familiar with BBL through articles that had been written for different outlets or by doing a search for extracurricular programs in the city. They would contact Mr. Jim who would always invite them to attend a session to see how they like it and then allow them to determine if they wanted to participate. One afternoon, Mr. Jim informed the participants that a new musician would be attending that afternoon. He was very hopeful that the new kid would work out because he played the drums and some of the emcees had been creating beats using drum machines and computer programs when the addition of a live drum track “would be so dope.” The emcees were enthusiastic as well and looked forward to the arrival of the new participant. Young Tony Beats was especially excited because he liked to add live piano to his beats and thought that the addition of live drums would take his beats “to the next level” and looked forward to the opportunity to collaborate with another musician. Mr. Jim and I were the only old heads in attendance and this would turn out to cause a bad situation to become worse. Mr. Jim had sent the drummer a list of popular drum loops
that were common in hip hop music and asked him to learn a few of them so he could “get a feel for the way he played.” When the young man and his mother arrived he informed Mr. Jim that he had not listened to any of the loops because he played “jazz drums” and he wasn’t sure he wanted “to record hip hop music, but [he did] want more time on a drum kit.”

The protectiveness of Mr. Jim and RapAcademy was evident as soon as the emcees in attendance went into the production suite to work on their lyrics. Mr. Jim had asked them to work in the suite while he tried to get the new kid to play hip hop drum loops.

**Young Tony Beats:** Yo man how he gonna tell [Mr. Jim] that he’s never heard any hip hop drums when he sent him a list of songs.

**Mont Magnolia:** I know right, the kid seems a little bit off. Maybe he’s just awkward. He’s here now though so he might as well play.

In the live room, the drummer warmed up a bit and played impressively. After he warmed up Mr. Jim played a couple songs that used the same drum track so he would have an idea of the kind of drum beat he was looking to hear. As the emcees were writing and bouncing ideas off of each other they couldn’t help but notice the drummer’s talent as he warmed up.

**Mont Magnolia:** He is kinda nice.

**YTB:** True. He’s got some skills.

Their admiration of his skills so gave way to frustration when the drummer insisted that he could not play the hip hop drums without a bass line. Mr. Jim, a well-rounded musician and former bass player in a punk band, was only too happy to oblige. He
came into the production suite to retrieve the studio’s bass where the emcees
immediately began questioning the drummer’s motives and desire.

**YTB:** [Mr. Jim] it seems like he’s interested in hip hop why you wasting your time with this guy?

**Mr. Jim:** We have had plenty of kids come that weren’t totally into what we do when they first got here that ended up making real contributions, let’s give him a chance.

**YTB:** Alright, I mean he can play but do you think he will play hip hop? He seems to be all about jazz.

**Mr. Jim:** I’m not sure, but hip hop comes from jazz so we’ll find out.

**Mont Magnolia:** Are we going to record today?

**Mr. Jim:** Yessir, just as soon as we figure out [the drummer’s] deal.

Mr. Jim returned to the live room and plugged his bass into an amp and began playing the bass line that matched the drum loop he wanted the drummer to play. The drummer expressed discomfort saying that he wasn’t ready yet and asked if they could just jam a little until he felt ready. Mr. Jim agreed and they began to play. The longer they jammed the more frustrated the emcees got. They felt like the drummer was “clowning [Mr. Jim]” and “just using the studio to get some practice.” They were ready to take back control of the session and move forward with the recording they were supposed to be doing. The young drummer’s skills no longer mattered to them; all they wanted to do was get Mr. Jim’s attention so they could tell him that they thought he was wasting time jamming with the kid. They waved through the glass into the live room to get Mr. Jim’s attention. Mr. Jim called for a short break and came into the production
suite to talk to the emcees.

**Mr. Jim:** What’s up guys?
**Mont Magnolia:** C’mon, that guy is clowning you – he ain’t going to play hip hop.

**YTB:** We’ve been sitting here waiting and you aren’t getting anywhere with him. He won’t play a simple loop. It’s like he’s just using us for practice.

**Mr. Jim:** Alright, I’ll wrap it up with him for the day but I am going to invite him back, if we can get him on board it could be huge.

**Mont Magnolia:** I don’t know man, we’ll see. He’s just lucky [Lyric] wasn’t here today because she would have murdered him.

While hyperbolic, the last point that Mont Magnolia made was certainly accurate. Lyric would never allow slights, real or perceived, toward the program or Mr. Jim pass without addressing them and the patience that Mont Magnolia and Young Tony Beats showed that day despite being frustrated by the situation would never have been exhibited if Lyric was in attendance. Mr. Jim went back into the live room and spoke with the drummer and his mother, explaining that the emcees needed to record and therefore the jam session had to end. He invited them to come back and walked with them to the door. Mr. Jim later revealed that while walking out the boy’s mother confirmed that he had Asperger’s and that he wasn’t really comfortable in new situations. When they arrived at the door he again invited them to come back again, hoping that if he were able to become comfortable he might make really strong contributions to the work that was being done at RapAcademy. They chose not to return, but thanked Mr. Jim for the opportunity to come in and check it out. While it is still widely believed by the emcees and old heads alike that live instrumentation would
be preferable, the musicians will have to fit in with the rest of the community in order for it to work.

This example shows how the members of the community of practice take it very seriously and would not welcome into the community anyone that did not take seriously the work they were undertaking. Especially poignant was the notion that the drummer was “using us” which emphasized how much the community had become a part of who the participants were and how they viewed themselves as practitioners of hip hop. They recognized immediately that the drummer was not interested in the work being done by RapAcademy and were further frustrated that they were not treating Mr. Jim, as the head of the community with the respect that he deserved. I believe that if the drummer had chosen to come back the emcees would have tried to be welcoming but they would have needed to ensure that he understood that he was part of a larger community that worked and learned together.

**Peace Out**

Over the course of time there is a natural type of attrition that takes place with all communities of practice and this is especially true of programs in which youth participate voluntarily and RapAcademy is no different. During the course of the study there were several instances of emcees scaling back their participation and in these cases the emcees explained to Mr. Jim the reasons they were cutting back, however as Mr. Jim notes “I have never had a kid stop who then came and debriefed about why they stopped.” This unfortunately leaves him to “intuit why some have stopped.” Lady V
has kept in touch with several emcees that have left the program and she thinks it comes down to “some people getting caught up in wanting to do the next thing to make a buck and sounding like the next person.” She also believes that some people wanted to be mic hogs and couldn't take the constructive criticism.”

While the emcees end their participation with RapAcademy that does not mean that Mr. Jim is willing to just let them fade away. He appreciates the importance of each of the members of the community to its growth and success and would rather not see the emcees leave and relates the steps that he takes in order to keep the lines of communication open relating, “I stay in touch through social media to keep the relationship going.” However, no one whose participation lags escapes without Mr. Jim at least trying to get to the bottom of it.

On afternoon Mr. Jim seemed especially introspective and we had the following brief conversation:

Mr. Jim: I haven’t heard from Mont in weeks.

PC: I hope he’s ok.

Mr. Jim: Me too. I am going to try to reach out to his mom this week if he is not here today.

Mr. Jim did reach out to Mont Magnolia’s mother, who explained to him that she had been going through some health issues and her son had been coming home directly from school to help her. When he returned the following week after an absence of about a month he reengaged and wanted to participate in new ways. Upon his return I was able to speak with him about his absence.
PC: Hey kid, everything ok?

Mont: Yeah Mr. Campbell, I was just goin’ through some stuff and couldn’t be here for a couple weeks.

PC: You know that [Mr. Jim] was worried about you, right?
Mont: I know. I could have been back sooner but I felt bad that I didn’t talk to him.
PC: Well I am sure he’ll listen. I heard that your Mom had some health issues, how is she doing?

Mont: She’s good now; that was a couple weeks ago, yeah she’s good.

PC: How about the last couple weeks?

Mont: When I missed and didn’t tell [Mr. Jim] that I wasn’t coming I felt bad and then I was dealing with some school stuff and y’know some things here were just… I don’t know.

PC: What stuff from here?

Mont: I don’t know… I mean… I just think that I have learned a lot from Antwan and want to do more beats and production and less rapping.

PC: I think [Mr. Jim] would totally go for that, if he didn’t have to worry about that he would be able to focus more on the writing and organization of the sessions. You should talk to him about it.

Mont: I will, thanks Mr. Campbell.

The interesting part of this interaction is that Mont Magnolia used the opportunity for a conversation with me as a warm up for the conversation with Mr. Jim that he thought might be uncomfortable. His reticence about sharing the idea with Mr. Jim stemmed from the fact that Mr. Jim held him in such high regard as an emcee. He was afraid to disappoint [Mr. Jim] by moving into the background, and doing production when Mr. Jim had always touted him as one of the hardest working emcees working
with RapAcademy, with the two even having recorded a song together that Mr. Jim used as an example for new emcees of the type of product that was possible if they put in the time and effort to develop as a lyricist.

What was most interesting about the situation was that Mont Magnolia knew that Mr. Jim was worried but he couldn’t bring himself to come back because he felt badly for not seeking his advice sooner. After he reengaged, Mont assumed a different role moving away from emcee and more toward production and recording. In this role he assumed more leadership, really talking with the emcees about the kinds of songs they wanted to make and trying to create beats that would help them present their messages in the ways that they wanted. Mr. Jim could not have been happier with the transition and recalls that “he was an obscenely talented producer who thought way outside the box and he brought sounds out of ho-hum programs like GarageBand that makes me wish so badly I could hear what he would’ve made after learning more about Reason and the other software we work with now.”

The second week after his return Mr. Jim gave him his first shot at board operation in the recording suite and the change was immediately evident. He worked the board and the emcees like a pro, causing Mr. Jim to declare that the future of BBL was running the board.

The situation with Mont Magnolia was especially interesting because as an active member of the community of practice he was afraid of the consequences of switching up his role in the program. He didn’t see that his value to the program did not come

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from his lyrical skills but rather was tied directly to the ways in which he participated in an all-around fashion. His value was connected to the ways in which he worked with the other members to solve problems and engage in the types of discussions that helped the other members of the community grow and that he could be just as valuable, if not more so in a behind the scenes role.

Conclusion

The emcees are not just participants in RapAcademy, they truly are builders in the ongoing construction of the community. They play many different roles at different times often choosing when they will assert themselves and how they will take up the responsibilities that are presented to them during the life of the program. As active participants in the community they bring to bear their life experiences and engage in the conversations that help them to do the work of critical literacy thinkers and actors (Lewison, Leland, and Harste, 2008). In this chapter, I made an effort to show the ways that the many different types of youth participants engage with the work that is being done at RapAcademy with an intentional move to spotlight the female emcees in ways that other studies about hip hop do not, showing them as at least equals to their male counterparts in the development of this community of practice. In the next chapter I will look at the ways RapAcademy can have an impact on the greater conversation about education and schooling.
CHAPTER 6
CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Having had the opportunity to observe this group my initial beliefs concerning the power of participating in extra-curricular activities for youth has been solidified. I have always believed in the power of after school programming as a means of helping to encourage student engagement in the school. While working at Bambino Catholic School and doing my initial work with the boys it was not unusual to have up to half of the student population participating in various programming that was being offered after school. When I became the principal at The Charter School I encouraged teachers to drastically increase the number and variety of afterschool programs offered. It was not unusual to have one-third of the school’s 225 students in the building after school on any given day for voluntary programming.

Where I am now located

The emcees and oldheads at RapAcademy and the work that they took part in there have impacted me and my teaching in a great way. As a teacher of pre-service educators, the majority of the work that I do now is to prepare them to be successful teachers of reading and writing. The lessons learned at RapAcademy frequently find their way into the conversations and classes with these students. However, a greater impact and work that took place at RapAcademy realizes itself in two classes that I have created for our English department for first and second year students called Hip Hop: A language of Social Justice and Hip hop Words in Action. I came into the study with the
idea that the research that I was doing was practitioner research but I wasn’t sure where it was leading. Having taught the abovementioned classes over the course of the past four semesters it has become clear. The lessons learned through watching Mr. Jim and modeling his willingness to let the students guide the direction of the class has encouraged me to do the same, often letting the discussion follow the path the students want to take it down. I have also internalized the notion that trust cannot be assumed but rather must be built. The capacity for building trust is especially tenuous because of the student demographics of the college. While at RapAcademy the issue of white old-heads and African American emcees was something that seemed an early impediment to the type of trusting relationship, once the initial tryst issues were overcome things ran smoothly. At the College the issue of trust is taken up in different ways. We are not creating music in the classes but we are taking up the conversations around the types of social justice issues that drive the creation of the emcees lyrics at RapAcademy. These conversations can often be uncomfortable for the students to engage in because with a student population that is seventy-two percent Caucasian, Ten percent African American, and six percent Hispanic the make-up of the classes is always mixed demographically. While the classes are mixed demographically the numbers do not match the statistics of the College, with class typically being split about evenly between African America/Hispanic students and Caucasian students. At the beginning of the semester there is always an intellectual probationary period where the students are trying to figure out how to engage with the topics and issues being presented in the
class discussions and readings. In some ways the second year class mirrors more closely what is happening at RapAcademy because there are always students who took the first year course that are mixed in with new participants and they help to lead the conversations knowing that we are operating within a safe space. One of the best aspects of the courses that I was able to develop is that the second year course encourages the students to participate in community engagement. Not having ready availability to a program locally with which the students could engage with we created one. The College is situated outside of the city but near another smaller urban area. Over the course of time the College has partnered with many community groups and we reached out to one such to see if they would be interested in an extra-curricular hip hop program. The design of the program allowed me to bring my experiences from my work with RapAcademy into the classroom. I invited Mr. Jim to come and speak with the class and he spoke at length about the types of issues faced when he asked the kids too soon to be open with things that they were not ready to share, what a new program would look like, how it would be organized, and what role the students would play in the program. Upon starting in this position I was afraid that my work with hip hop and youth would be pushed aside and that I would have to focus solely on teaching reading and writing methods classes. Happily, I was wrong and the work that I began continues through my classes and the work that they are doing in the community.

My desire to begin encouraging my current students to participate in communities of practice has grown because of this work. At the college where I currently teach we
espouse the idea that our students should grow across their time with us to be actors for social justice on a personal, local, and global scale, but in practice it seems like we are often missing the mark. I believe that using the four dimensions of critical literacy with students alongside the development of a community of practice may yield the result we are hoping for in the long run.

**Why and How Hip Hop Matters**

In Chapter five I described a moment from a university class which several emcees and Mr. Jim attended where they were asked why RapAcademy was important to them and the reasons they participate. In response the emcees shared range of insights that point to why they create hip hop music in general and why they participated in RapAcademy specifically. In discussing their reasons the emcees noted:

**Judge:** I have a lot of things to say… [I can] let out the anger, because sometimes kids hold it in and do something that might ruin their life. I guess that is the point of hip hop.

**Lady V:** [hip hop] gives you a chance to express yourself, recognize negativity and change them into positives.

**Lyric:** without rap I think I might be out there doing bad stuff.

Clearly the emcees recognize the power of hip hop in their own lives. They have things to say and they want people to hear their voices. They believe that if people get the opportunity to hear the things that they are saying it might have the power to affect positive change. Later in the conversation Lyric followed up pulling back the curtain a bit for her audience

**Lyric:** If I can change my actions, it might get into them and help them change.
Her statement drives home her earlier point because she acknowledges that hip hop and RapAcademy have had a positive impact on her and helped her to change her actions and she would like to pay it forward, through her music and her participation in RapAcademy. The participation of Lyric in this community of practice obviously had a great impact on her actions and how she viewed herself personally and as a part of the different communities to which she belongs.

The other emcees also talked to the broader reach of their music and message

**Lady V:** what we think, what we are saying, we want our voices to be heard and [through hip hop music] that’s how we demand it.

**Judge:** we want what we have to say to be heard; if we can do good then we can make the world a better place.

The emcees underscored the aspects of performing hip hop that resonated with them. As this dissertation illustrates, the literacy community created by the oldheads and the emcees at RapAcademy is one based on mutual respect and concern for one another that gives the emcees chances embrace their beliefs and create the kind of music that will have an impact. This speaks directly to the four dimensions of critical literacy because they are not only disrupting the commonplace, they are acting on the disruption in ways that they hope will impact society.

I once heard a museum docent say “you look at a painting differently when you know the Art History behind it” and I feel the same way about the music that was made by the emcees at RapAcademy; the music has a different meaning because I know the emcees and I am familiar with their stories. Hip hop is many things, but it is certainly a
language that is used by young people to tell their stories. It is the radical honesty of hip hop that makes many adults who hear it uncomfortable and the youth want to engage in and with it. The emcees of RapAcademy are not unusual, they want their voices to be heard and they have found a place that encourages them to use raise them, record them, and share them with other people. By welcoming me into their community of practice they gave me the opportunity to consider sociopolitical issues from a variety of viewpoints. While I believe myself to be enlightened and aware of the world around me, it is true that I bring my experiences, privileges, and biases to any situation, working with the participants of RapAcademy bolstered my belief that there are things worth standing for and young people worth standing with in the fight for justice.

Why Did I Do This Research as a Practitioner?

I entered into this project with a commitment to practitioner inquiry. My own location as a former middle school teacher and administrator and current teacher of preservice educators informed my understandings of students’ intellectual and social capacities as well as the complexity of teaching and learning relationships, even if the work is not happening in a traditional classroom setting.

My goal throughout this study, which is the same as it has been since the inception of the program was to work alongside the oldheads and emcees to create a community of artist and intellectuals that use hip hop music as a vehicle for the distribution of their messages of social justice. This dissertation has emphasized the relationships and the community of practice that developed among the participants over the life of the program.
program. The focus of this dissertation is a snapshot in the ongoing history of RapAcademy and as such is necessarily an incomplete portrait but offers several instances for looking more closely at how the participants interacted with one another and how those interactions might have an impact on the practices of educators and administrators that work with adolescents, especially adolescents for whom hip hop plays an important role. While I focused of the happenings of the RapAcademy I learned more about what it means to be a teacher and a learner in a literacy community and I hope the readers have as well. It would be perfectly natural for the emcees to want to record their thoughts and feelings’ knowing that in the end they would have a CD of their work to listen to or share with their families and friends, but that is not enough for this group. They demand that their voices be heard and make every effort to share their work with the people. They are engaged in a type of social justice work that stretches beyond the immediate community of RapAcademy and reaches out to others in an effort to affect change. The oldheads at RapAcademy engage with the emcees in ways that their teachers are not willing to engage and it is this point of reflection that has had the greatest impact on me as a teacher. This project was a constant reminder of the importance of listening to the students voices.

When I began this research I wanted to look at the role does hip-hop play in the lives of urban adolescents in an afterschool hip hop music production club, but over time it became so much more than that. I learned that the participants of RapAcademy while embracing hip hop and a culture and using the music as a tool became a really tightknit
community and because of their shared domain (Wenger, 2006) worked together in ways that were uncommon in school. The work that was being done at RapAcademy, both mine and that of the students, impacted how I look at knowledge generation and how the generation of knowledge might impact teacher learning. As a virtual outsider to the world of hip hop who has always appreciated the genre I stood in fascination of the emcees as they shared, through their lyrics, the kinds of insights into their lives and worlds that I would have loved to have experienced during class discussions. Additionally, their critical interrogation of the world and societal situations – including news and popular culture gave me pause and made me rethink the ways that I had engaged my students in the past and how I would engage with them in the future. By allowing the emcees to show that they were expert and embrace what they were sharing, the oldheads at RapAcademy were able to learn a great deal. As I pointed out in chapter four Mr. Jim frequently says, “I just hang out with the kids and let them be awesome" and his words are profound because the insights that the emcees bring to their lyrics and to the work being done at RapAcademy is awe inspiring. My immense respect for the participants impacted how I dealt with them and I realized very early on that they were teaching as much if not more than I could teach them.

**Implications**

For the members of RapAcademy the work became about so much more than the work. They developed a community that was built on a strong foundation of trust, understanding, and a willingness to work toward a common goal. The work that they
did has implications for every teacher and student, but certainly teachers and students in urban areas where hip hop is so prevalent. What would it mean in the field of education if students and teachers were able to communicate with one in legitimate ways around important topics with an understanding that the students were expert in what it means to communicate their thoughts? In the sections that follow, I unpack how the work being done at RapAcademy featured in this study could lead us to reimagine how policy, research, and practice could respect and learn from some of our most at-risk students.

**Implications for Policy**

The meetings of RapAcademy documented in this dissertation were situated in an extra-curricular time in which the students participated voluntarily. In as much, people might disregard the findings that the community members are in some way motivated to participate that they might not be in school and that schools are not interested in meeting the needs of the students. I am not arguing that there are not schools that have been created around the common academic pursuit of the students or learning communities within schools that are structured around students’ future professional interests, but the current climate in schools values testing as a means to demonstrate student ability and readiness for higher education. This climate is being called into question by a greater number of voices; however it is still the policy with some states even administering an all or nothing test for graduation. Many students, particularly African American and Latino students opt out of such tests by leaving school prematurely. In the city where the research took place 27.5 percent of African American
and 23.7 percent of Latino students who began high school in 2008 had not completed by 2014 many choosing to stop attending. In his book *Beats and Rhymes and Classroom Life* Marc Lamont Hill describes a program that addresses the needs of a group of urban students whose needs were not met by a traditional classroom setting. The students were much more successful when they were able to engage with academic topics that were presented in a way that they felt comfortable, using hip hop as a foundation for presentation of material.

Current policies assume that all students are prepared for a set of standardized tests which see them as exactly the same as every other student in their particular state based on the presumption that they have been presented with the exact same curriculum. Further policy makers assume that these tests are an accurate predictor of the intellectual capacity of the students taking them. Recently, institutions of higher learning throughout the country, in a push back to this standardization have begun to disregard the results of standardized tests as a measure of the academic talent of students as a criteria for admission, instead choosing to focus on the grades that the students achieve in their classes, the types of activities that they participate in, and other ways in which they engage with their community. This push back is especially consequential for students who have traditionally been penalized for having to take tests that are believed to be culturally biased.

Policymakers need to move away from standardized tests and toward the types of learning that is taking place in RapAcademy and other places like it where young people
are being engaged in authentic ways around topics that are important to them using language that is accessible and allows them to demonstrate their expertise and intellectual fire. Additionally, policymakers must find ways to encourage the growth of the minority teacher pool. The number of students from traditionally underserved populations continues to grow and the number of white teachers in public schools remains at about 82 percent. The cultural difference between teachers and students can led to misunderstanding and miscommunications that disproportionately affect African American and Latino students. These cultural differences are largely due to white teachers desire to appear unbiased by adopting a philosophy of color blindness which ignores that there are cultural differences between groups of students. Policymakers would be wise to attend to the knowledge of educators like Mr. Jim, who acknowledges the difference between him and his students while at the same time engaging and embracing the aspects of their own multiple cultures that they bring with them to the program. It is Mr. Jim’s keen self-awareness that has allowed him to create a program where high school students feel like their words and their lives are valorized. Not all teachers are able to do this, not all teachers have a voluminous working knowledge of hip hop music, or the willingness to develop such knowledge, however most teachers, given the opportunity to get out from under the weight of standardized tests and be allowed to engage their students in real and thoughtful dialogue could find some of the same results with regards to their students expertise.
Implications for Research

This study supports the use of hip hop music with students as a means of engagement and respectful interaction with the world and calls for an expansion of its increased use in classroom settings. There are many ways that hip hop is being used in the classroom setting, but these uses are typically in support of the academic canon. By allowing the students to bring into the classroom their out-of-school literacies, in more authentic ways, they can make connections between what they are doing in and out of school. Mr. Jim was able to create a space where the emcees were bringing into the conversation not only things from out of school but those things they were learning, experiencing and talking about in school.

As a teacher, Mr. Jim intentionally set out to create a space where young people could engage with the world around them in critical ways using a social justice lens that are not always evident in school. As researchers we need to be aware of the ways that educators, no matter the contextual nature of their interaction with children, engage students in real conversation and encourage them to bring to light the injustices that they see in the world around them.

An important contribution of this work is that it shows how the adults and youth members of an extra-curricular club work together to create the community of practice in which they all live together. While there are clear delineations between the adult and youth members, it is also clear that they are learning from and with one another. As members of community the participants of RapAcademy had at the fore a desire for
social change that began at a grass roots level. Together they experienced what it means to be actors for justice using a medium that is accessible to a wide audience of people.

This study also makes a case for a research that is collaborative and guided by a respect for the subjects of the research as well. From the beginning of my project I adopted practitioner’s stance which allowed me to keep at the fore the knowledge generated by the adult and the youth participants of RapAcademy and to engage as a participant myself. Researchers in the field of education should engage in a more collaborative approach to their work keeping in mind that the knowledge being generated is not theirs but rather a collective representation of all the parties involved in the project.

Implications for Practice

This study furthers the work that is being done in some classrooms and some extra-curricular settings around the use of hip hop music as a means to engage students in the work of education. Some educators are using hip hop as a means to teach poetic conventions and others are using it as a way of connecting to the canon to help with critiques of formerly inaccessible texts, but few are using it as a means to engage with the students about the injustices that they see in the world around them. Young people are incredibly observant and they will, if they are allowed, share what they see and more importantly allow the teachers in their lives to see it through their eyes. Throughout this study I have shown the ways in which the students are willing to engage with one
another and the adults in the program and I believe that the reason is largely because they have found an audience that is willing to listen. Where this work is unique is that it looked at the community of practice that was developed in the hip hop program. The notion that students be able to bring their out-of-school literacies to a community of like-minded peers and adults can only improve the level of engagement that students have with their education.

This work has implications across grade levels and teachers owe it to their students to find ways to develop the kinds of relationships that will encourage students to develop the kinds of critical skills that will encourage them to question the world around them while also building their academic skills. In the standard curriculum, teachers bring Standard English to the classroom and everyone must use that language only. The students’ non-standard usage and community knowledge are outlaw idioms – unacceptable in school. From its earliest days hip hop used African American Vernacular English as a vehicle for talking back to the problems that artists saw in their own communities and the larger world around them and it can be used to the same affect in classrooms today. Further, the conversations that can be generated around the music can, while at times uncomfortable, offer students and teachers a way to develop a more fully trusting relationship. A hurdle that needs to be overcome by teachers is the notion that hip hop texts are not worthwhile for analysis and discussion. While it is true that there are many hip hop lyrics that could be deemed objectionable, if young people do not get to engage critically with them they might accept them at face value without
ever interrogating the meaning behind what is being said. If teachers are willing to learn from their students, students are more likely to learn from their teachers.

As I mentioned earlier in this chapter I am using hip hop as the foundation for two courses that I am currently teaching and lessons learned at RapAcademy have had a great impact on the ways in which I engage students in discussion in class and the ways that I interact with the work they produce for the class. I am always asking them to provide me with more, more background, more detail, more context, and sharing with them ways that their work has an impact on me and my way of thinking. My students are the experts of their own lives and they bring the sum total of their life’s experiences to the classroom with them whether I engage them or not; I think it is better to engage them and I encourage all teachers to adopt the same position.

Conclusion

In the introduction, I relayed a story about a school friend that had become a police officer and his claim that “ninety percent (90%) of the black guys we arrest have rap lyrics in their pockets” and posited that even if his statistics were hyperbole, they pointed to the troubling trend that many young people today see hip-hop music as an outlet for expression and many of the adults, be they teachers, parents, or law enforcement, that interact with them are dismissive of the expression. This dismissiveness is a problem that needs to be rectified. Hip hop is becoming more popular by the day and not just in the United States, it is truly a global music genre. While hip hop has always represented a resistant voice of urban youth, many more
youth are engaging with it and seeing it a youth culture through which they can develop their identity. The music is speaking to kids all over the world but they are not being given the opportunity to engage in the kinds of conversations that will give them the best opportunity to deconstruct and interrogate the music in such a way that they can use it for full effect. It is important to find a way, with the help of the young people, to connect teaching in the school with life outside of school.

Imani Perry (2006) reminds us that hip hop calls for radical honesty concerning the complexity of black communities and art and I contend that it takes teachers that are willing to engage in radically honest conversations with their students if they are going to reach them. When they reach them they will create the type of respectful community of practice described in this work. There are teachers like Mr. Jim that are willing to create spaces for these conversations and the emcees of RapAcademy demonstrate that if you create the community, they will participate. We need to create more spaces – in schools and out.
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