"When Keeping It Real Goes Wrong": Enacting Critical Pedagogies of Hip-Hop in Mainstream Schools

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> It ain't all good, and that's the truth
> Thangs ain't goin' like you think they should.
> -from "All Good?" by De La Soul feat. Chaka Khan
>
> "These Ph.D's make everything sound so perfect. Like, just do it like this and everything works. What if it fails? I wish they would talk about that!"
> - Overheard in fieldwork workshop with pre-service teachers

Abstract

In the context of transformative practices in public education, hip-hop is often presented as a culturally relevant solution to the disempowering curriculum and structures that have consistently ignored the needs of minoritized youth. The stories we tell of hip-hop in schools typically highlight the successes of these programs, cultivating the illusion that hip-hop pedagogy is a straightforward approach to youth-centered, culturally-relevant education. However, as is the case with critical pedagogies in practice, many of the lessons to be learned rise out of the difficulties of enacting these pedagogies in real classrooms. As reflexive scholars, it is important to not only focus on our successes, but also to highlight our challenges for the purpose of improvement. Based on their individual experiences as teachers in classrooms engaged in hip-hop based education, the authors explore the challenges that exist within the practice of critical pedagogy and raise important questions about the efficacy of hip-hop pedagogy and liberatory education in traditional school settings.

KEYWORDS: hip-hop education; critical pedagogy; culturally sustaining pedagogy; liberatory education; critical reflexivity; hip-hop pedagogy

Introduction

The use of hip-hop music and culture in classroom teaching first gained attention in the 1990's as educators began to engage historically marginalized youth in classrooms through a popular culture that was relevant to their lives and identities. Since then, hip-hop based education has developed into a widely popular field of research and teaching whose influence has reached mass audiences through news and talk show spotlights on teachers enacting this work in the classroom. Despite this exponential growth, hip-hop education has yet to be clearly defined as a subject matter. In fact, practitioners of hip-hop based education can be found using hip-hop in the classroom in diverse and, oftentimes, contradictory ways.

Beyond its role as a musical genre and a form of popular media, hip-hop is also a culture that encompasses a diverse set of identities and meanings. Thus, hip-hop is deeply personal and subjective. Bettina Love described hip-hop as being borne of an "intricate balance" between "ideas of determination, resistance, and the long enduring fight for Black freedom" and "the seductiveness of the material and psychological conditions of capitalism, sexism, and patriarchy" (Love 2016: 415). Additionally, the meanings, language, and aesthetics of hip-hop are constantly evolving, such that very little remains constant in the field of hip-hop, further complicating its use in public education. Thus, those involved in the research and practice of what Hill (2009) referred to as hip-hop based education (HHBE) are charged with the responsibility of articulating an amorphous field of pedagogy that is predicated on a constantly shifting cultural form. As HHBE continues to grow in practice and popularity, it is imperative that hip-hop educators begin to recognize and explore the ways in which HHBE is still a tenuous field of research and practice whose complexities must be further understood in order for HHBE to move forward as a field of critical inquiry and practice.

In this article, in order to better understand, address, and work through existing tensions in the field of hip-hop education, the two co-authors discuss the practical implications of teaching through and with hip-hop in mainstream (1) school settings by reflecting on their individual experiences in teaching hip-hop as an academic subject in public high schools in the United States. In the following sections, we describe HHBE as a form of critical pedagogy that carries with it inherent contradictions as a liberatory practice inside traditional public schools. Kelly shares her experiences in teaching a high school English elective course on hip-hop literature and culture, followed by Sawyer's critical reflection on teaching a hip-hop based class at an urban public high school in a program designed as an intervention for students "at risk" of dropping out. We conclude by presenting implications and questions that arise from our individual narratives as well as research in the fields of critical pedagogy and hip-hop education. Through this process of critical reflexivity (Paris and Alim 2014), we seek to offer a "loving critique" (Paris and Alim 2014) of the practice of hip-hop based education in order to both improve and expand on its use in schools as a critical approach to liberatory education.

Critical Theories of Hip-hop Education

Critical theories of hip-hop based education, which we refer to herein as "hip-hop pedagogy," have developed from the field of critical pedagogy, an approach to schooling that is rooted in critical and cultural theories of education that both validate and challenge "students' experiences and perceptions that shape the histories and socioeconomic realities that give meaning to how students define their

everyday lives and how they construct what they perceive as truth" (Darder, Baltodano, and Torres 2003: 11). Critical pedagogy moves beyond preparing students to encounter the world as it exists and includes practices that engage students in envisioning and constructing "social futures" (New London Group 1996).

Voussoughi and Gutierrez explain that pedagogy enacted through this lens must include an examination of "1) how social relations are constituted; 2) how power and ideologies are imbued in practices; 3) how tools expand or limit opportunities for the development of critical thought; and 4) how students develop as thinkers and critical actors" (2016: 143). Critical pedagogies encourage resistance to dominant structures of oppression that typically silence and marginalize those from non-dominant populations. This entails teachers and students sharing power in a classroom in which students play a role in the creation and implementation of curriculum. The ultimate goal of this approach is for individual, educational, and social transformation to take place (Kincheloe 2008).

Since the field of critical pedagogy is broad, pedagogical practices that center students' lives and identities but that lack a focus on radical transformation can oftentimes be confused with critical pedagogy. Kincheloe highlighted this confusion when he wrote, "Today, critical pedagogy has been associated with everything from simply the rearrangement of classroom furniture to 'feel-good' teaching directed at improving students' self-esteem. Simply caring about students, while necessary, does not constitute critical pedagogy" (2008: 9). Similarly, while bringing hip-hop into the classroom as a means to engage students in traditional curriculum is a pedagogical approach that acknowledges students' cultures, it does not necessarily include a resistance to hegemony or the development of critical consciousness.

Since hip-hop pedagogy is predicated on theories of critical pedagogy, a practice that has yet to reach public education on a large scale (Cho 2010), the implementation of hip-hop education has numerous barriers that it must face within mainstream, academic settings, including the preparation of pre-service and in-service teachers looking to include hip-hop music and/or culture in their classrooms. The challenges of critical pedagogy in school settings are not new. Ellsworth found that the scholarship on critical pedagogy operated at a "high level of abstraction" (1989: 300) and was largely unhelpful in enacting strategies of criticality and empowerment in the actual classroom. Just as with critical pedagogy, hip-hop pedagogy is much more idealized in theory than it is in practice. Gosa and Fields observed an "interesting misalignment between the HHBE scholarship and the actual use of hip-hop in schools" (2012: 20). Indeed, employing such radical approaches to teaching in an academic environment, one that is still rooted in traditional school structure, poses unexpected challenges that at times threaten the very idea of liberation and empowerment that it seeks to offer (Ellsworth 1989; Gosa and Fields 2012; Shor 1996).

Challenges in Hip-hop Based Education

Hip-hop culture is historically and presently a youth-dominated movement (Akom, 2009; Chang, 2005; Morrell 2004), cultivated in an ethos of resistance to authority. As such, it is rooted in a set of values that are inherently anti-establishment and resistant to dominant forces of oppression. How, then, can one authentically bring hip-hop into a public school classroom -- a space that is traditionally oppressive to non-dominant populations and ultimately regulated by state forces -- without

dissolving its power as a youth-led and counter-hegemonic force? Hip-hop pedagogy places students at the center of learning and power within the classroom (Gosa and Fields 2012). It invites student voice and necessitates that the teacher, or facilitator, de-center his/her own power and authority in order to create a more just and democratic space. However, this space is still operating within a structure that is regulated by school rules and policies (Ellsworth 1989; Shor 1996).

While individual students and classrooms are unique and will carry their own narratives, there are internal and external conflicts that Kelly and Sawyer encountered in teaching high school hip-hop courses that were reflective of broader issues in critical pedagogy and hip-hop based education. While some of these conflicts have been discussed in previous literature (e.g. Hill 2009; Irby and Hall 2011; Love 2016), many have yet to be adequately explored and will continue to persist as long as victory narratives (Kirshner 2015) remain the dominant voice in research on hip-hop based education.

As self-described critical educators who have taught in K-12 and post-secondary settings, we utilize the framework of critical reflexivity (Paris and Alim 2014) to analyze the challenges we each encountered in teaching hip-hop courses in public high schools for the first time. Cunliffe describes critical reflexivity as the practice of embracing "subjective understandings of reality as a basis for thinking more critically about the impact of our assumptions, values, and actions on others" (2004: 407). The experiences we describe in this article were significantly impacted by our intersecting identities, including our experiences of race, class, gender, schooling, and hip-hop. Additionally, as participants in our stories of teaching hip-hop, our understandings of these narratives are deeply subjective and inseparable from our positionalities. In this article, we hold up our narratives for investigation of how our "assumptions, values, and actions" (Cunliffe 2004: 407) impacted our students in hip-hop based classrooms. We do so in an attempt to create healthy discourse regarding the intersections of critical pedagogy, hip-hop education, and public schooling and to provide guidance for classroom practitioners who wish to engage with hip-hop education from a critical perspective.

Narrative One: Hip-hop Literature and Culture

This section discusses Kelly's experiences in teaching a self-designed hip-hop literature and culture class, a semester-long English elective offered to students in grades 10-12 in a suburban, public high school located near a large northeastern city in the United States and in which Kelly was a full-time teacher. As an elective course, the HHLC class did not satisfy any particular requirements for the students outside of academic credit accrual and registration for the course was voluntary. At the beginning of the semester, 10 students were enrolled in the class. By the end of the semester, there were 8 students enrolled and one non-enrolled student who came every other day during his off period. Despite the small class size, the students in the HHLC class came from diverse ethnic, racial, and economic backgrounds. Table 1 outlines the racial and gendered makeup of the class by the end of the semester. Kelly identifies as a Black woman, an important detail in understanding the dynamics of this hip-hop class.

TABLE 1. Demographics of HHLC Class

Racial/Gender Identification	Number of Students
Male	7
Female	2
Black/African American	4
White/Caucasian	5

Student Identities

An argument that is often made in support of hip-hop education is that it is culturally relevant for youth, and especially for youth of color who identify with hip-hop music and culture. However, hip-hop identity is not "monolithic" (Land and Stovall 2009); rather, it is fluid and expansive. According to Barrett, "students interact with and perceive hip-hop in fascinatingly diverse ways" (2011: 48). There is no single definition of hip-hop identity, and a hip-hop class is not guaranteed to satisfy or connect with all hip-hop-identified students. In fact, bringing hip-hop music into an academic space can have the opposite of the intended effect, further silencing or marginalizing students who engage with hip-hop outside of school. Additionally, students engaged in hip-hop music or practices may not necessarily be interested in critically engaging with hip-hop texts or participating in dialogue centered on identity or culture. This was the case with a few of the students in the HHLC class.

At one point during the semester, Kelly had a meeting with three male students in the HHLC class who often seemed disconnected from class discussions. She spoke with them outside of the class to find out how to better engage them. She began the meeting with the following questions: "What would interest you? What would make you ask questions and speak and want to be more involved and even lead conversations?" This was the students' response:

> JAKE: I don't talk cause I'm just chillin'.
> LEON: Yeah, I know, right?
> DREW: Same with me.

Kelly then remarked that on the first day of class these same three students were some of the only ones to express that they actively listened to hip-hop music, while many of the others in the class admitted that they did not listen to hip-hop (2). She also invited these students to give class presentations on the artists that they listened to which included artists from hip-hop collaboratives such as the A$AP Mob, TDE (Top Dog Entertainment) and Odd Future. Of the three students, only Jake had taken up the invitation to present music in class earlier in the semester. While Jake expressed eagerness to share his music with the class, he was less eager to participate in class discussions. During their meeting, Kelly told the three boys that she wondered why the students who were the most knowledgeable about and engaged with hip-hop music had so little to say in class. The following dialogue ensued:

JAKE: Well, it's just like- I think about it like- everyone has their opinion and nothing can change. Be wrong, be right. Doesn't matter.
KELLY: You really think that? Don't we learn from each other's opinions?
LEON: I think we do, but like, sometimes people take, like, the wrong thing.
JAKE: Some people get really passionate.
LEON: Yeah.
JAKE: Too passionate for a high school class.

As exemplified in this dialogue, these students did see the class as a place in which one could share his/her views; however, they did not see it as a productive or transformative space, and therefore, did not find it useful to engage in class dialogue. While Kelly often overhead these students speaking amongst themselves about particular songs or artists during class, this group of hip-hop-identified youth often elected to refrain from active participation in whole-group discussions of hip-hop texts, thus dispelling the notion that culturally relevant content is enough to engage students whose identities have been historically marginalized or ignored by school curriculum. In fact, even if both the content and the structure of classrooms are redesigned to respond to the needs and identities of students, this may not be enough to mitigate the effect that years of authoritarian-based schooling has had on youth in schools. The following sections of this narrative discuss the inherent tension between teacher authority and youth agency in classroom teaching and learning.

(Re)Structuring Classroom Spaces

Kelly approached the HHLC class with the intent of creating a space in which student voice and experience would drive class text and discussion. One way in which she attempted to foster a democratic classroom space was through restructuring the desks in the HHLC class from rows into a circle. She hypothesized that rearranging the seats in this way would promote student engagement and dialogue. It also would serve as visible resistance to traditional school structures and norms, reinforcing the idea that studying hip-hop in a classroom space was in itself disruptive, if not transformative. In his research on a Utopia class that he taught at a community college in Staten Island, New York, Shor also discussed the ways in which physical space can uphold or disrupt traditional classroom norms. He explained, "the students' relationship to seating is a significant text revealing the power relations embedded in schooling... Classroom furniture helps discipline students into a status quo of inequality" (1996: 10-11). Based on this idea, Kelly thought that her students would welcome the restructuring of the classroom furniture to reflect a more egalitarian setting.

After the first few days of rearranging the class desks into a circle, however, the students grew tired of the effort and pleaded to simply leave the desks in rows. For them, resisting the structures of oppression and dominance in the classroom was not worth the effort of rearranging seats every day. Thus, on most days, students in the HHLC class could be found sitting in neat, structured rows, their backs to each other, and their bodies facing the front of the room, where the teacher's desk sat. Seidel argues that transformative education "… cannot happen in a reality confined by rows of desks, textbooks, lockers, and bells that ring every forty-five minutes—even if during those periods the desks are pulled into circles and the textbooks are replaced with the hippest hip-hop workbooks" (2011: 145). Such examples

encourage us to wonder how a hip-hop class can work to bring about the significant changes that critical educators seek to make in schools while the physical structure of schooling remains intact.

Power and Authority in the Classroom

As stated earlier, Kelly identifies as a Black woman, representing a minority population in the U.S. teaching force (Farinde-Wu, Allen-Handy, and Lewis 2017). Of the three young men described above, two identified as Black and one as White. While the students do not mention race or gender as a factor in their experiences in class, it is worth nothing that having a Black woman as the authority figure, a first-time occurrence for many of the students in the class, may also have had an impact on these students' experiences and their decisions regarding participation.

In addition to the impact that individual social identities can have on relationships of power, young people's negotiations of power in the classroom are also mediated by their experiences as students who are typically disempowered inside school spaces (Kincheloe 2008). In the HHLC class, the students' unwillingness to exercise agency is indicative of a significant tension within critical pedagogy, which Shor referred to as the naturalization of culture:

> … culture is presented as nature. That is, what has been socially and historically constructed by a specific culture becomes presented to students as undebatable and unchangeable, always there, timeless. Like plants growing towards sunlight, students are expected to sit in rows facing the lecturing teacher at the front, the unilateral authority who tells them what things mean, what to do, and how to become people who fit into society as it is (1996: 11).

Aside from the seating arrangement, the HHLC students' acceptance of the power of authority in academic spaces was evident in other ways. Although the class was designed for students to take on leadership positions and drive classroom dialogue, there were many moments in which the students seemed burdened by the responsibility placed on them and were reluctant to assume authority or take control over their learning and production.

A few months into the semester, the class was invited to attend a youth conference on the topic of hip-hop and social justice education. The students were asked to create a digital media product that would be presented at the conference. When Kelly approached the class with this opportunity, she made it clear that this product could be anything that they desired but should in some way be reflective of the individuals in the class and their time spent together throughout the semester. In order to give the students creative freedom over this project, Kelly resisted the inclination to suggest ideas and formats. Instead, class time was devoted to dialogue and collaboration regarding the project. While many of the students offered ideas throughout the process, they were frequently distracted during these conversations and unable to decide on a single idea or even work through multiple ideas in a coherent manner. The following excerpt is from Kelly's researcher journal. In it, she reflects on a class session that she held with the HHLC students in the school's guidance office, hoping that having this discussion outside of the physical classroom space might facilitate the students' collaboration:

> At first, it seemed that the students were set on doing some sort of critical parody video, but when we met in [the guidance counselor's] office on Friday to flesh it out, it all went awry. The students were thoroughly distracted by her plethora of stress relieving toys. They were also butting heads a lot and not listening to each other. It seemed that Anthony and Sasha … wanted to present something critical, meaningful, and connected to class discussion. At one point, Anthony even said something like, "That movie we watched last week [*Beyond Beats and Rhymes*] was so powerful. We should do something like that." I LOVED that he said that, but felt stymied by my own unwillingness to give the students ideas or push their thinking in a certain direction. It was a disaster.

Eventually, the students grew exasperated with the circular dialogue and said that it would be much better if Kelly simply told them what they should do. While the project was eventually completed, it took two weeks of class time for the students to decide on a topic and only five out of the eight students participated; the other three, two of whom were in the same group of three that Kelly had met with earlier that semester, did not contribute to the final project.

This is just one example of something that Kelly experienced frequently during this class: many of the students often preferred to take a backseat to their learning, conceding power and authority to the teacher, even when their ideas and expertise were earnestly solicited. Freire acknowledged this same tension when describing resistance from a participant in a culture circle in Brazil, who wanted to skip the process of engaging in critical dialogue of the object of study and instead asked, "Why don't you … explain the pictures first? That way it'll take less time and won't give us a headache" (2004: 63). Like the students in the HHLC class, many of Freire's adult learners also found the work of co-constructing knowledge to be overwhelming.

Shor attributed this to the underlying socialization that has occurred before class even begins. He argued that students have long since accepted their roles as "targets of authority" (1996: 17) and exercise a particular kind of agency by resisting involvement in the class and maintaining a physical and emotional distance from the teacher. The assumption that critical educators often make is that students will be eager to actively participate in classroom dialogue and in the creation of class curriculum. The reality of implementing critical pedagogy in the classroom is that students may not be ready or willing to take on the responsibilities that this approach requires of them. Thus, educators may encounter reluctance or resistance from students. Shor wrote, "It would be naïve for me to act as if I can walk away from teacherly authority and simply dump power into the students' laps" (1996: 18). Students who are not accustomed to or ready for assuming shared control over the classroom may feel burdened by such a task, especially as it comes in opposition to the ways in which they have been conditioned to learn and behave in a classroom. It is also myopic for teachers to believe that they do not still possess a great amount of power in the classroom, even in democratic and critical spaces.

In a K-12 public classroom, the teacher still has a certain degree of dominance and authority over the students whether or not he/she chooses to exercise it. Failing to recognize this tension within a hip-hop class can be even more disempowering for students since it implicitly maintains structures of power while explicitly voicing

ideas of democracy and transformation. Ellsworth discussed this contradiction in the following critique:

> … theorists of critical pedagogy have failed to launch any meaningful analysis of or program for reformulating the institutionalized power imbalances between themselves and their students, or of the essentially paternalistic project of education itself. In the absence of such an analysis and program, their efforts are limited to trying to transform negative effects of power imbalances within the classroom into positive ones. Strategies such as student empowerment and dialogue give the illusion of equality while in fact leaving the authoritarian nature of the teacher/student relationship intact (1989: 305).

In many youth-centered programs that are not regulated by institutional structures, young people can gain legitimate authority and enact power and leadership. However, a traditional classroom structure inherently requires a distinction between teacher and student, or "knower" and "learner." Even as teachers perform the role of learner in the classroom, privileging student voice and leadership, the title of teacher will always lend a particular credence to the words and actions of the formal educator in the room. Ellsworth explained, "... while I had the institutional power and authority in the classroom to enforce 'reflective examination' of the plurality of moral and political positions before us in a way that supposedly gave my own assessments equal weight with those of my students, in fact my institutional role as professor would always weight my statements differently from those of the students" (1989: 307). Similarly, Kelly found that even as she restructured the classroom space through seating arrangements, student presentations, and student-driven curriculum, she still had the authority to ask students to stay or leave the classroom; to distribute assignments and grades; and to conduct class to fit her own needs. At the same time, as the classroom teacher, she had complete control over when or how she would step back and let the students take charge of the class. Not only did this make it difficult for the students to navigate their own authority in the classroom, but it also meant that she was always in some way the ultimate authority in the classroom and could "take back" that power whenever it suited her.

As exemplified above, there is a multitude of challenges presented by the practical application of critical pedagogies in mainstream classrooms, including in hip-hop based education. While numerous studies indicate the power of critical pedagogy and hip-hop pedagogy in transforming structures of teaching and learning (e.g. Hall 2017; Hill and Petchauer 2013; Williams 2009), it is imperative that we also investigate the complexities of this work so that teachers can be more prepared and effective when enacting critical pedagogies of hip-hop in traditional school settings.

Narrative Two: The Barz Brigade

Youth voices are often underrepresented in educational spaces (Cook-Sather 2002; Sealey-Ruiz and Greene 2011). This is especially so for Black and Latino boys, who are increasingly researched as subjects of public schooling but are rarely positioned by educators as experts with valuable voices, experiences, and bases of knowledge (Jackson, Sealey-Ruiz, and Watson 2014). In an effort to disrupt this pattern, Sawyer,

who identifies as a Black, male college professor and former administrator, developed The Barz Brigade, a high school hip-hop program designed to reengage students who were in danger of dropping out of school. The program came about after Sawyer was approached by a high school principal who asked if he would consider developing a program for a segment of their student population at a public high school in a city close to where Sawyer resided at the time. The administration had been dealing with an increasing number of Black and Latino males not attending school regularly and on the verge of dropping out. The administration wanted a program that would potentially help to reengage these students with school.

The school, consisting of five "houses," assigned five students from each house to participate in the program for a total of 25 students. The selected students were described as the school's "most dire cases" in need of immediate intervention. Based on his understanding of the interests and background of the students, Sawyer developed the Barz Brigade with a focus on hip-hop, writing, and critical media literacy. He hoped to create an environment in which the students' voices were centered, their stories were being heard and valued, and their social and emotional needs were being addressed. Thursday mornings from 9:00-10:30am was the time designated for the program. On average, each student had missed over 75 class periods by this point in the academic year. On the way to the classroom on the first day of the program, the assistant principal told Sawyer that she could not guarantee that anyone would show up, even though participants were notified about being on the list for the program. However, when he entered the room, Sawyer was surprised to see most of the students there waiting.

Keeping it Real

A current trend in research on the education of Black and Latino youth is that increasing the population of Black and Latino teachers, especially male teachers, will positively impact the academic achievement of Black and Latino students (Ahmad and Boser 2014). While the paucity of teachers of color in America's public schools is certainly a contributing factor to the persisting inequities in urban and public education, simply placing in classrooms more teachers who look like their students without the training and support required to succeed within a system that was not designed for them is insufficient in eliminating the "education debt" (Ladson-Billings 2006) that is owed to the country's most vulnerable populations (Bristol 2015). Simply sharing an identity with students, while important, is not enough to disrupt centuries of educational inequity. Engaging with hip-hop in the classroom requires continuous self-reflection on the part of the educator and a willingness to learn both with and from students, even when their ideas challenge those of the teacher. Sawyer arrived at these critical understandings through his work with the Barz Brigade.

For Sawyer, growing up in Harlem during the height of the crack epidemic meant that Black bodies were constantly at risk in his neighborhood. He saw crack destroy families and take his friends to prison. Hip-hop gave him a voice and a space to channel his anger and find positive avenues for action. Seeing that the students in the Barz Brigade grew up in similar neighborhoods and faced similar challenges, he concluded that he could understand and connect to these young men and that engaging them in a hip-hop based academic program might help to begin to address the challenges they faced both in school and in their home lives.

Sawyer's assumptions about his connections to the young men began to dissipate as he began engaging the students in textual analysis of hip-hop songs. For example, during one class session in which the students repeatedly sang lyrics to "Ain't Worried about Nothin'" by French Montana (2013), Sawyer challenged them to recite the lyrics to "see if they made any sense." While Sawyer found the beat of the song to be catchy, he found the lyrics to be wanting for meaning and stylistic rigor. Telling the students how he felt, Sawyer then challenged them to see if Montana's lyrics could stand up to his favorite rapper, Big Daddy Kane (3). He selected a song from Big Daddy Kane that he said would "destroy" a Montana song and asked the students to recite Montana's lyrics out loud while he did the same with Kane's. At the end of this experiment, some of the students said that the Montana lyrics did not really make sense. However, one of the students, Baptiste, then said, "I'm sayin, ya'll old people always bringing up old songs. It's not really about lyrics now. It be about beats. [Montana] not the best but his swag is crazy." The other students agreed with the statement. Sawyer realized that he had inadvertently privileged his own values and tastes over those of his students, a common, yet counterproductive occurrence within hip-hop education when one is working to empower young people.

Sawyer's intention in discussing the differences between rappers was to expose the students to his favorite lyricists of the "golden era" of hip-hop; however, in doing so, he dismissed the artists with whom the students felt connected, thereby dismissing their values and identities. Duncan-Andrade acknowledged this tension in stating:

> A final caveat that is important to include in all discussions of teachers' accessing youth culture for pedagogical and democratic ends: Nothing said here suggests that the teacher abrogate her or his own cultural predilections or 'standards' in favor of what may be, almost by definition, transient styles, language, and so forth (2010: 317).

For Duncan-Andrade, teachers working within hip-hop based education should continue to hold on to their standards and values of hip-hop culture and artistry while recognizing that their students might hold different values based on their own cultural contexts and experiences. However, as we discussed earlier, teachers are inevitably positioned as those with power and expertise in a classroom; how then, can teachers of hip-hop avoid privileging their own ideals and those students whose values are most aligned with them? This is a delicate balance that can easily become off kilter without constant negotiation of educational practices in the hip-hop space.

Getting Punched

Mike Tyson once said, "Everyone has a plan until I punch them" (Bernardino 2012). When planning the hip-hop program, Sawyer developed a syllabus, printed worksheets, and ordered books for the class. He thought that he had the perfect plan and was ready to transform his students' academic lives through hip-hop culture. However, he came into the classroom with what he thought would work without any input from the students. During the second meeting of the Barz Brigade, Sawyer started a lesson on the history of hip-hop. Some of the students were engaged, but many were not. When Sawyer stopped to check in with them, the moment resulted in a conversation about neighborhood violence. One of the students had recently lost a family member to gun violence, so the class spent time

talking about trauma. The students' desire to have a space to be heard and deal with their lived reality superseded Sawyer's desire to deliver academic content.

After the second class meeting, Sawyer decided that the people best positioned to determine the content and direction of the class were the students, themselves. Like Kelly, he thought that in giving the students the power to determine what class should look like, he could transform this academic space into one that directly met the needs of its students. Based on this approach, he used the time during their routine morning cyphers (4) to ask students how they wanted to approach the class for the day. He assumed that they would enjoy having the freedom to determine the structure of the class period. However, similar to what Kelly experienced in her class, the students were more comfortable with Sawyer giving his ideas on how to use the time, insisting that he set the agenda for the day. During one class session, Poppy said, "You're the teacher. You know mad stuff. You can do it and if we don't like it then you can move to something else." As a critical educator, Sawyer was forced to grapple with the gap between what he thought student agency should look like and how the students chose to enact their agency. Like Shor (1996), he wanted to create a space where the students would direct the course of the program and was surprised by their decision to place the teacher back in the leadership role he was trying to relinquish.

Parental Advisory; Explicit Lyrics

In the 2012 documentary, *The Art of Rap: Something from Nothing,* Grand Master Caz stated, "Hip-Hop didn't invent anything. Hip-Hop reinvented everything." In a similar way, Sawyer wanted to use hip-hop culture to reinvent what writing could be in a school setting. In his experiences with the Brigade, a narrow view of literacy created an environment where students were apprehensive of sharing their writing and other creative endeavors. Since multiliteracies (New London Group 1996) were not valued in their school, these students had adopted an identity of "non-writer" and began to see themselves through the lens of the standardized curriculum focused on traditional, usually non-creative, forms of literacy and learning.

One tension that Sawyer did not foresee encountering in this approach dealt with the students' song lyrics. When he first asked them to share verses that they wrote, the students presented lyrics containing references to violence, misogyny, drugs, and other explicit material. Their songs seemed to resemble what they listened to through digital and social media. The content of the students' lyrics raised tensions for Sawyer as an adult, parent, and educator. As a youth mentor, he wanted the students to feel free to express themselves but did not want to condone the celebration of the themes they often presented. Paris and Alim called attention to this tension, explaining that hip-hop pedagogies tend to focus on social justice-oriented texts, rarely acknowledging "the ways in which youth might reify existing hegemonic discourses" (2014: 93). Paris and Alim argued that educators operating within a framework of culturally sustaining pedagogies must "interrogate and critique the simultaneously progressive and oppressive currents in these innovative youth practices" (2014: 93). The challenge that arises from this practice, however, is in critiquing the hegemonic content of students' creative work without alienating them from the classroom or implicitly establishing the teacher's ideologies as morally correct and as a goal for the students to reach.

As the creator of this program and the authority in the classroom, Sawyer wanted to respect the students' art while ensuring that the program would not be shut down by an administration who might take issue with the content of the students' songs.

He also wanted to have a few songs recorded that they could share with the administration and possibly perform at a school pep rally but knew that this would not be allowed if the songs were deemed offensive. Sawyer tried to alleviate these tensions by asking the students to record verses for a song that did not contain profanity, murder, misogyny, or drug references. Rashaad, one of the more outspoken students, said, "Then what the hell we gonna talk about? The verse gonna be empty." Another student, Jeff, then said, "You know we won't be able to do a song for the school with cussing and stuff. So we gotta keep it school-like and clean." Sawyer told them that he was not asking for "Sesame Street" rhymes but wanted to be able to present the song to the administration. Everyone agreed to come up with a "school appropriate" verse for the song that they would record the following week. The students chose "reality" as the theme for the song. They wanted to discuss their upbringing and experiences living in marginalized communities. The song was entitled "My Life" and recorded to the instrumental used in Meek Mill's song "Heaven or Hell (Meek Mill 2013)."

After leaving class, Sawyer began to wonder if he had violated the students' rights to language and expression and if he was judging them by his personal standards of respectability or from his subjectivities as an educator and father. He wondered if there was a hypocrisy inherent in attempting to honor young people's cultures and identities by bringing hip-hop literacies into a school space and simultaneously regulating what and how students could write within that space. While Sawyer had initially begun the program with the intent of enacting transformative pedagogies in the classroom, his insistence on "cleaning up" the students' writing for public consumption may have undone that work. And to what end? As Susana Morris wrote, "Respectability hasn't saved us" (2017: 155). While Sawyer knew the school would most likely support his decision to censor the songs, he struggled with the impact it might have on the student artists.

When the class met for the next session, all six students scheduled to be on the track had their verses. Since there was limited time in the school studio, they started recording without Sawyer previewing their verses. The first student recorded his verse, which followed the established guidelines. Sawyer was excited when the next three students followed suit. Rashaad was next. When he started, his first line began by describing how "wet and juicy" a female was and what he would do to her in the back of his car. Everyone turned to look at Sawyer and the student engineer stopped the recording. Jeff yelled, "Yo! That can't go on there," and Rashaad said, "Why not? I did not curse or kill nobody. I talked about my life and that's what I do." Sawyer told him that he understood his point and asked if he had any additional verses. Rashaad said that the other verses were "worse." The group decided to let him record his verse so that they could ensure that everyone had their verses recorded before their time ended in the studio. The remaining student also did not write a "school appropriate" verse. Even though they finished the recording, Sawyer knew he would not include the last two verses in the version presented to the principal. He made this decision without the input of the students and felt troubled by the ways in which his power and perceived wisdom in making this decision to cut two students' verses came in conflict with his initial desire to center and amplify the voices of the students. Ultimately, this assignment caused Sawyer to reflect on what his intentions were with the recording assignment as well as the entire program. Was he attempting to get them to see the world through his eyes rather than their own? How does a critical educator avoid imposing their ideologies on the classroom, however liberatory those may be?

Further Questions and Implications

The narratives shared in this paper are in no way neat or simple. They do not tell successful stories of "spinning hay into gold" through the use of rap lyrics in the classroom. Rather, they challenge hip-hop pedagogues to think about the inherent contradictions involved in the implementation of school-based hip-hop programs and the role of critical educators in classroom spaces that can simultaneously validate and limit students' voices and the power of hip-hop music culture. Even the most well-intentioned hip-hop educators may, whether knowingly or not, uphold harmful ideologies of youth cultures and communities in classrooms focused on their empowerment. What, then, about this structure is radical or transformative? Does bringing hip-hop into an academic space truly empower students or does it ultimately "re-enforce the 'hidden' culture of power in the classroom and existing norms of schooling?" (Gosa and Fields 2012: 3). In the position of classroom teacher, can an educator ever truly share power with students? For those who operate outside of public school classrooms, radical approaches to education such as HHBE may seem inevitable in the quest for equity in schools. However, the aforementioned tensions force us to ask if critical pedagogy can be authentically enacted in a traditional school setting, especially one in which students have already been socialized to "do school" in a particular way. And if so, what compromises must be made along the way?

This article opens with two important quotes. The first, stated by Chaka Khan in collaboration with rap group De La Soul, encourages us to confront the truth in our practices and to acknowledge when situations are not unfolding in the way we had expected. The second statement was made by a pre-service teacher who was frustrated by the simplicity with which many academics describe their work in the classroom -- as though one need only follow these simple steps and they will be nominated for teacher of the year. The reality of classroom teaching is, of course, much more complex than this. As critical educators focused on teaching for equity and social justice, we are hopeful about the possibilities of critical hip-hop pedagogies enacted in school spaces. In order to push this work forward, we advocate for a space within critical education research to share stories of struggle through which we can heal, reconcile tensions that arise within this field, and collectively work towards authentic teaching practices that honor the full humanity of teachers and students in school spaces.

Endnotes

(1) The term mainstream herein refers to schools whose structures, including curriculum and policy, are primarily consistent with more traditional frameworks of public education rather than frameworks of critical pedagogy or community-based education.

(2) The other students' responses to the question of why they had signed up for the class ranged from general interest or having positive previous experiences with Kelly as a teacher to needing course credit.

(3) Brooklyn, New York born rap artist most popular during the late 1980's and early 1990's.

(4) A hip-hop cypher is a gathering of emcees/rappers usually in a circular formation where they share freestyle rap verses (with or without a beat), with each person taking a turn. In the classroom, the cypher was used for students to share creative pieces, issues/concerns, and plans for the day.

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