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Los Angeles

YOU MUST LEARN!

Hip-Hop Steps

Into the

Educational Reform Discourse

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education

by

Yusuf Allahjah

2012

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

You Must Learn!
Hip-Hop Steps Into the Educational Reform Discourse

by

Yusuf Allahjah
Doctor of Education
University of California, Los Angeles, 2012
Professor Ernest Morrell, Chair

The technological age has led to tremendous advancements, and in the process, has presented several challenges. One of the most pervasive is the need for an educated, highly skilled workforce. Unfortunately, many of today's youth are failing to obtain the requisite education and skills to survive in the new global economy, a fact confirmed by alarming high school dropout rates. One demographic group, more than all the others, frequently tops the lists of statistics about the rates with which they are unable to successfully navigate and complete their secondary education, namely African-American males.

For most people the words 'HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUT' represent a life sentence to abject poverty, especially in the increasingly competitive global economy we live in. At a minimum, many would argue, a high school diploma is needed in order to have a reasonable opportunity to earn a living wage. The long-term effects of dropping out of school are devastating to individuals, communities and the national economy.

In recent years much attention has been given to the crisis in the American educational system; from former President George Bush's 'No Child Left Behind' initiative, to Oprah Winfrey's specials on the subject, to Bill and Melinda Gates funneling millions of dollars to organizations and schools, to TIME magazines' cover story entitled "Dropout Nation." Unfortunately, despite all the attention, the streets, prisons and dead-end jobs continue to be

filled with far too many hopeless, desperate, frustrated, and angry youth, who have not been able to fulfill their dreams of becoming successful, productive members in society, partially due to their inability to complete high school.

This study seeks to direct the attention and energy of an often overlooked, yet potentially powerful group of popular culture icons, i.e. Hip-Hop artists, to the frequently discussed topic of educational reformation. Since Hip-Hop artists have generally become accepted as major opinion leaders, representing the eyes, ears, and feelings of global youth expression, this study seeks to determine what, if anything, Hip-Hop artists can contribute to the discussions about educational reform and strategies to reverse the disturbing trends among African-American males at all levels within America's educational system.

The Hip-Hop artist participants corroborate many popular theories and ideas about educational reform including an emphasis on parental involvement and engagement, the pervasive cultural and community influence on underachieving students, the importance of positive male role models, and most importantly the preeminence of cultivating respectful, caring relationships between African American male students, teachers, and administration. Simultaneously, these artists problematize some of the prevailing stereotypes about African American male students such as they don't value getting an education, they don't care about school, or that their parents are not concerned about their education. In all this study provides a very unique look at the issue of educational reform from a modern and unique perspective.

The dissertation of Yusuf Allahjah is approved.

Tyrone Howard

Darnell Hunt

John Rogers

Ernest Morrell, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2012

DEDICATION PAGE

In loving memory of my beloved family members, physically with me when we started this process, and now Resting In Peace— Maxine Eure, Gary Eure and Steven Eure. Also to my big sis and bro, Novella and Timothy.
I already know you all are very proud!

To my blessings—Ahkeyah and Aakeem. It's your turn next.

To my rock— Joseph W. Eure.
I have been so blessed to have your love, guidance and counsel all of these years. I believe I've finally got the message to seek Him that you've been telling us all these years...
and I completely agree!

To my future— Viviana (mi Preciosa hermosa) & Sebastian.

Father God and your Divine Son, without whom none of this would be possible. Thank you for your grace, mercy and unconditional love!

Thank you to my committee chair Ernest Morrell, you're amazing, and the rest of the team—
Tyrone Howard, John Rogers and Darnell Hunt!

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CHAPTER 1

Struggles of African-American Males in the Educational Pipeline

Global competition and the demands of today's workplace highlight the importance of obtaining a quality education in American society. Advancements in science and technology have led to a severe need for a well-educated, highly skilled workforce. Unfortunately, many of today's youth are failing to obtain the required education and skills necessary to survive in the new global economy. Despite decades of struggle to provide equal access to a high quality, effective education for all students there remains a substantial gap in the quality of education many African American students receive, as well as a gap in the academic achievement levels of African American students when compared to their white counterparts. During the 70's and 80's, the achievement gap between African American and white students was reduced significantly, however that progress has come to a halt, and since the late 1980's, the gaps have widened (Haycock, 2001). At all levels of the educational pipeline, from elementary school to post-secondary degree attainment, the difficulties experienced by African American male students within the educational system is well documented. Although the number of African American students enrolled in post-secondary institutions has risen, the figures are far below the representation of African American students in K-12 schools (The College Board, 2008).

As a focal point to highlight the challenges faced by African American male students I will use the alarmingly high and disproportionate high school dropout rates. However as researchers have shown, dropping out of high school is understood to not be a singular event, but rather a process that frequently begins many years before a student actually stops attending school (Rumberger, 1995; Finn 1989, 1993). Students at-risk of dropping out begin to demonstrate identifiable risk factors in middle school, and sometimes as early as elementary

school, confirming my position that African American male students are experiencing difficult challenges at all levels of the educational pipeline. High school dropouts can be predicted with 70% accuracy based on low reading scores students receive as early as the third grade, and sixth graders are determined to be at risk of dropping out once they get to high school if they fail English or math, miss more than 20% of school, or receive at least one “unsatisfactory” behavior mark in just one class (The College Board, 2008). These factors are closely linked to those identified at the high school level, namely academic performance and student engagement (Rumberger, 2008; Silver, Saunders & Zarate, 2008). Despite these early warning indicators, the numbers of African American males dropping out of high school, oftentimes after years of struggles throughout their earlier schooling careers, continues to go unabated (Levin, Belfield, Muennig & Rouse, 2007).

The seminal National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS, 1988) determined that 77% of the students who dropped out did so for school-related reasons. Within the study, 46% of students claimed they did not like school, 39% claimed they failed to meet academic standards, and 29% claimed they did not get along with their teachers. Furthermore, Catterall (1998) claims that overall, most dropouts leave school because of a feeling of failure or alienation. Student disengagement can lead to disciplinary problems, high rates of absenteeism or truancy, poor classroom behavior and decreased levels of participation in extracurricular activities, all of which have been linked to lower chances for graduation (Jerald, 2006).

Scope of the High School Dropout Problem

According to a study by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, more than one million students drop out of high school every year. If the trend continues, more than 12 million students will drop out nationwide over the next decade (Bridgeland, Dilulio & Morison, 2006). A 2005

research report by The Civil Rights Project at Harvard University called the national high school dropout problem the ‘Invisible Crisis.’ The report, entitled *Losing Our Future*, identifies national high school graduation rates at 68% of those who enter 9th grade graduating with a diploma in 12th grade. Graduation rates, the report further specifies, are substantially lower for Black students at 50%. Black males fare even worse with graduation rate levels of 43% (Orfield, Losen, Swanson & Wald, 2004). A closer look at the nation’s largest urban school districts reveals more disturbing figures, with the graduation rates for the predominantly Black districts of Atlanta (39.6%), Columbus (34.4%), Oakland (30.4%), and Cleveland (30%) falling even further behind (Orfield et al., 2004). Another study found that within the state of California’s largest district, Los Angeles Unified School District, only 48% of Black students who enroll in 9th grade complete the 12th grade four years later (Oakes, Mendoza & Silver, 2007). Even when African American students do graduate, they do so as twelfth graders with reading and math skills at the same levels as white eighth graders (Kirst & Bracco, 2004).

The decision to dropout of school is both dangerous and costly to individuals and society, especially in a post-industrial and technological age where minimal job requirements require a high school diploma to secure competitive employment.

Economic and Social Impact of High School Dropouts

Several studies have identified the public health, social, and economic impact of dropping out of school on individuals and society. With regard to public health, an individual’s educational level is reported to be one of the strongest predictors of one’s health. Higher educational attainment is consistently associated with lower death rates, and conversely lower educational attainment is associated with higher levels of risky behavior such as smoking, obesity, and lower levels of physical activity (Freudenberg & Ruglis, 2007).

Socially, high school dropouts make up approximately two-thirds of all prison inmates (Harlow, 2003), and it has been estimated that each new high school graduate generates savings of \$31,800 to the criminal justice system and reduces social/victim costs of crime by \$79,900 (Levin et al., 2007). Increased high school graduation rates reportedly reduce murder, rape, and other violent crimes by 20%, reduce property crimes by 11%, and reduce drug-related offenses by 12%. Dropouts are more than eight times as likely to be in jail or prison as a person with at least a high school diploma, and the probability of incarceration for Black male dropouts is at least 60% (Levin et al., 2007).

Economically, dropouts are more likely to live in poverty, receive public assistance, and to be unemployed. More than two-thirds of all high school dropouts will use food stamps during their working life, and a high school graduate is 68% less likely to be on any welfare program compared to a dropout. Four out of every 10 young adults (ages 16 – 24) lacking a high school diploma received some type of government assistance in 2001 (Levin et al., 2007). High school dropouts, on average, earn \$9,200 less per year than high school graduates, and about \$1 million less over a lifetime than college graduates (Bridgeland et al., 2006). In California, the state reportedly suffers \$46.4 billion in total economic losses from each cohort of 120,000 20-year-olds who never complete high school (Levin et al., 2007). Studies show that the lifetime cost to the nation for each student who drops out of school and later moves into a life of crime and drugs ranges from \$1.7 to \$2.3 million (Bridgeland et al., 2006).

With the staggering public health, social, and economic impact dropping out of high school has on individuals, their families, and the nation as a whole, it is imperative to better understand the nature of the problem and attempt to provide alternative solutions to help arrest the trend.

There are several theories that I will explore in this section to contextualize the problem of high school dropouts for African-American students. One popular theory that has attempted to explain the disproportionate dropout rate for African-American males falls under the description of Resistance Theory.

Resistance Theory

The Oppositional Culture Model, offered by John Ogbu over 20 years ago, is a theory which suggests that involuntary minorities, including African-Americans, do not aspire to get good grades because their peers perceive that achieving academically is “acting white” (Ogbu, 1978; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). Some researchers have argued against Ogbu’s assertions and found that there is no significant difference between Black students’ attitudes toward school and their white counterparts (Ainsworth-Darnell & Downey, 1998; Harris, 2006, Fisher, 2005), instead Black students hold attitudes toward school that are at least as positive as those found in students from other racial groups.

Whether or not African-American students actually hold attitudes toward school that are more resistant than their peers from other racial and ethnic categories, the fact remains that there is a severe problem in their high school completion rates and a thorough analysis and critique of the educational system from the perspective of those who seem to be struggling with it the most may prove helpful. For that critique I will utilize Critical Theory as a lens with which to assess shared criticisms of the educational system and the personal agency that students’ possess to take control of their lives and obtain an education despite personal obstacles and institutional barriers.

Critical Theory & Self-Efficacy Theory

A growing number of studies (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2005; Akom, 2009; Stovall, 2006; Aldridge, 2005) have begun to analyze the role of Hip-Hop as a tool to introduce frustrated, disempowered, inner city students to a level of critical consciousness central to critical theory as introduced by influential pedagogue Paulo Freire. This process could potentially lead to students becoming involved in identifying systemic educational problems, analyzing the causes of the problems, and ultimately posing solutions to the problems (Smith-Maddox & Solorzano, 2002), including their own individual responsibility.

One promising way to engage disenfranchised and disengaged students to begin to think critically, as well as consider their own agency and responsibility in academic achievement is through the popular youth musical movement known as Hip-Hop. While the musical genre has not been universally accepted by all segments of society, it has earned a position in the hearts and minds of youth globally, requiring that its powerful voices be heard.

Hip-Hop & Its Influence on Youth Attitudes

Hip-Hop has become one of the most popular forms of global youth culture, and has virtually become, “the black CNN that we never had. It’s the invisible network, rap records...” offered rap pioneer and socially conscious rapper Chuck D (Eure & Aldrich, 1991). Hip-Hop artists have found meaningful places in the realms of entertainment, politics, and economic trends (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002) — especially among alienated or disenfranchised youth. Researchers have also shown that Hip-Hop can play a positive role in education, based on the critical way that Hip-Hop culture utilizes youth voices and simultaneously offers alternative views on many mainstream subjects (Akom, 2009; Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2002).

Hip-Hop artists are in a unique position to address the high school dropout epidemic amongst African American male students for two major reasons. First, despite their professional success and celebrity status, many Hip-Hop artists grew up in similarly impoverished neighborhoods and attended similarly ineffective schools as the African American students struggling with the educational system today. Secondly, Hip-Hop artists have the eyes and ears of the world on them, and can therefore bring much needed attention to many of the educational reform issues that have been discussed for decades but remain neglected.

While some would argue that educational reform and issues such as high school dropouts among African-American students should be the sole domain of educators, researchers and politicians, critical theorist Paulo Freire counters that often, educators and politicians speak and are not understood because their language is not attuned to the concrete situation of the people they address (Freire, 1970). Which is precisely why Hip-Hop is critical in this discussion. Any genuine discussion about transforming the reality, which disproportionately impacts minority students, must assign a fundamental role in the discussion and process of transformation to minority youth (Freire, 1970). There is presently a disjuncture between elements of youth culture on one hand, i.e. Hip-Hop, and the orientation of teachers and the conduct of public schools on the other (Goodlad, 2004). It is my contention that no group of individuals better embodies the sentiments of minority youth than Hip-Hop artists, and therefore may be best qualified to help decrease the gaps in communication and understanding that presently exist. The power of Hip-Hop artists stems from the convergence of two powerful forces; the proven commercial and societal success which makes even doubters have to acknowledge their potential, and the unparalleled position of reverence and respect paid by youth from all over the world. Hip-Hop artists in this context bring to the table, the “best of both worlds.”

Large numbers of youth globally are looking to rappers and their videos as a major source of entertainment, but also as an access point for information. As socially conscious Hip-Hop artist Chuck D wrote, “The youth are going right from school to their homes to watch videos. They’re learning more from the videos and rap songs than they’re learning from the schools,” (Ridenhour & Jah, 1997). Chuck D’s comments reveal the informal educational network which runs parallel and simultaneous to the more traditional educational networks of home, school and church, and meet the criteria established by early African-American educators like W.E.B Dubois and Carter G. Woodson that education for African-Americans should be “pragmatic...critical, and grounded in the culture and historical experiences of African peoples” (Alridge, 2005). Hip-Hop has unquestionably become an informal system of education, and popular Hip-Hop artists, the esteemed teachers and leaders, capable of capturing the attention of educators and educational leaders, while also motivating and inspiring youth movements.

Leadership

As recognized trendsetters and leaders of youth culture, Hip-Hop artists have at times taken on the added responsibility that comes along with leadership. It is not a responsibility that they asked for, yet is imposed on them, by the mere power of their positions (Kouzes & Posner, 2007). It is undoubtedly part of the rationale behind Hip-Hop led movements of the past which addressed social and political issues such as 1989’s ‘Stop the Violence’ movement, in response to escalating violence in the Hip-Hop and African-American communities, and the 1990 single ‘We’re All in the Same Gang’ which also had an anti-violence, anti-gang message. Once again, Chuck D offers insight into the idea that minority communities in general, and the Hip-Hop community specifically, has a responsibility of leadership. “We must realize that we have to save ourselves and stop relying on other people to come up with great answers for us. We have to

save ourselves. We have to look within ourselves...” (Ridenhour & Jah, 1997). While Hip-Hop artists have been utilized in various social and political movements, such as rallying youth to register and vote, none have generated the national attention as the two movements mentioned above.

Central to recognizing Hip-Hop artists as leaders, is determining what dominant characteristic they possess which qualifies them for positions of leadership. One of Kouzes & Posner’s First Laws of Leadership is the concept of credibility. “Credibility is the foundation of leadership...if you don’t believe in the messenger, you won’t believe the message” (Kouzes & Posner, 2007). Many in the Hip-Hop community would agree, with popular phrases such as, “Keep it real,” and “Don’t talk about it, be about it,” as part of the accepted Hip-Hop lexicon.

In fact it could be argued, that of the five practices of exemplary leadership identified by Kouzes and Posner, three of them are practiced by many in the Hip-Hop community; modeling the way, which was discussed above, inspiring a shared vision, and encouraging the heart. In the area of inspiring a shared vision it is said that, “Leaders breathe life into the hopes and dreams of others...Leaders communicate their passion through vivid language and an expressive style,” something Hip-Hop artists have been recognized for doing on numerous levels for years, and leaders encourage the heart of their constituents to carry on (Kouzes & Posner, 2007), one example being legendary artist, Tupac Shakur’s call for listeners to ‘Keep Ya Head Up.’

To explore the challenges and difficulties experienced by African-American male students in the educational system I will use legendary Hip-Hop artists for the reasons stated above, and ask them to share their experiences, beliefs and attitudes about school; offer critiques of the educational system; ideas for educational improvement; and offer suggestions that will

support and promote personal and social responsibility toward educational attainment amongst African-American students.

Research Questions:

My study will be guided by the following research questions.

1. What experiences, beliefs, and attitudes do Hip-Hop artists articulate about education, its potential and purposes?
2. In what ways, if any, do Hip-Hop artists critique the educational system and offer ideas for its transformation?
3. In what ways, if any, do Hip-Hop artists promote self-efficacy toward educational attainment in African American high school males?

Research Design

Much of the literature regarding Hip-Hop and its relationship to the education system has sought to find ways to use the popular artistic form to serve two major purposes; a) using rap as a bridge to traditional school curriculum by increasing student engagement (Ginwright, 2004; Mahiri, 1998; Morrell, 2002; Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2002; Quintero & Cooks, 2002) and, b) using rap as a tool for developing critical consciousness among students (Ginwright, 2004; Morrell, 2002; Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2002; Land & Stovall, 2009).

One study (Au, 2005) sought to determine the relationship between Hip-Hop music and the educational system, but did so via an analysis of rap lyrics. While I agree that rap lyrics are important, I contend that the lyrics of rap artists themselves are not exhaustive enough to give a full and accurate portrayal of the complex attitudes members of the Hip-Hop community hold towards the myriad issues involving education. Therefore, in my view, a major source of data conspicuously absent from the research that has been done regarding Hip-Hop is the lived experiences and ideas of the rap artists themselves.

For various reasons there is much that rap artists have experienced and believe that they have not included in songs for public consumption. Due to the nature of my research questions a qualitative research design is best suited to provide a comprehensive look into the attitudes, beliefs, and experiences of Hip-Hop artists, specifically as it relates to the educational system. The in-depth interviews will provide an understanding of the lived experience and the meaning my participants make of that experience (Seidman, 2006). A quantitative, non-experimental design such as surveys would not be appropriate for this type of study mainly because the sample universe of Hip-Hop artists is much too small for the results of such a study to be generalized and replicated from the sample to larger populations (Cresswell, 2009).

Participants and Site Selection

It is my contention, and the rationale for this study, that the genuine, authentic words of Hip-Hop artists have power to generate critical praxis, involving both reflection and transformative action (Freire, 1970). Many educators and researchers agree that Hip-Hop has become one of the dominant languages in youth culture, especially amongst inner city youth (Akom, 2009; Mahiri, 2000).

My study will be presented as an analysis and critique of one of society's most important social institutions, by a select group of revered pioneers of the Hip-Hop genre, respected in the prime of their careers for their ability to represent a segment of the larger population that had generally been alienated and voiceless.

My sample consists of ten Hip-Hop artists. The Hip-Hop artists interviewed were selected by a qualitative sampling method known as snowball sampling. With snowball sampling a study sample is obtained through referrals made among people who share or know others with a particular characteristic. Snowball sampling is usually used when the targeted population does

not have high social visibility or is difficult to locate (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). In my case I was able to start the referral process with several Hip-Hop artists that I had worked with previously, and through them I was able to obtain referrals to the other artists that agreed to participate in the study.

In the next chapter I will review the literature on the theories to be used to provide context for my research study, and offer a lens by which to examine the struggles of African American students to achieve academically. I will also examine literature that discusses the utilization of popular culture for educational engagement and socio-political analysis (Akom, 2009; Au, 2005; Stovall, 2006).

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Descriptive terms like ‘crisis’ and ‘silent epidemic’ are not to be taken lightly in any context, but when these words are used to describe the number of people unsuccessfully completing one of the most important institutions in American society, it becomes especially disturbing — our American public educational system.

As discussed in Chapter One there are major national concerns regarding the low graduation rates for American high school students overall, and particularly alarming are the rates for African-American males. The psychological, social and economic implications for the lives of the effected students, as well as the larger economic consequences for society at large, make studying the dropout problem and the issues leading up to it an area worthy of further analysis in search for solutions.

The process of dropping out of high school, understood by many researchers to be a process rather than a singular event, frequently begins years before a student actually stops attending school (Rumberger, 1995; Finn 1989, 1993). Many explanations have been offered for the dropout ‘epidemic.’ Chief among them are academic performance, poor relationships between students and their teachers and administrators (Jerald, 2006; Silver et al., 2008; Catterall, 1998) and lack of meaningful engagement (NELS, 1988). However, despite the research on why students ultimately choose to dropout, or alternatively as some perceive it, are ‘pushed out’ (Riehl, 1999), there is still much that needs to be understood in order to reverse the disturbing dropout numbers.

There is general agreement that African-American male students earn lower grades, drop out more often, and attain less education than do other ethnic and racial groups (Mickelson,

1990), but there is general disagreement about the reasons for these differences. One of the central focuses of this study will be to capture the shared experiences and perceptions of a very visible and vocal group of African American males, former and current professional rap artists, regarding the public education system and possible causes and solutions for the difficulties faced in America's public schools, ultimately leading to a disproportionate number to dropout.

In this chapter I begin with a review of the literature on resistance theory, self-efficacy theory, and critical theory. These theories will provide context for my research study, and provide a lens by which to examine the struggles of African American students to achieve academically. I will then offer a definition of the musical genre of Hip-Hop and examine the literature that addresses the possible utilization of popular culture, vis-à-vis Hip-Hop, for educational engagement and socio-political analysis (Akom, 2009; Au, 2005; Stovall, 2006).

Resistance Theory

There is little disagreement that minority students, particularly males, underperform academically and drop out of high school more often than their peers across racial and gender lines (Mickelson, 1990; Carpenter & Ramirez, 2007). Some scholars have identified social structural conditions as a primary cause of the intergroup discrepancies in educational performance and attainment, (Bowles & Gintis, 2002) because students eventually view schools as tools in the “reproduction of inequality rather than places where education is seen as a practice of freedom, a place to build critical consciousness, and social mobility” (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002). As a result of such perceived structural inequities, African American males, more than others, have accepted the structural social conditions and their effects on social mobility opportunities, and have therefore internalized a level of resistance to academic achievement and the educational system, explicitly manifested by decreased motivation to achieve academically. The explanation for this phenomenon, referred to by scholars as ‘Resistance theory,’ essentially seeks to explain how students interact and struggle with educational structures and create meanings from their interactions (Giroux, 1983; Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2002; Solorzano, 1998; Solorzano & Delgado-Bernal, 2001).

For the past 30 years, with his theory termed *The Oppositional Culture Model*, a leading theorist in this domain, John Ogbu, has been at the center of controversy stemming from his 1978 study (Ogbu, 1978), *Minority Education and Caste: The American System in Cross-Cultural Perspective*. The theory suggests that Black students do not aspire or strive to get good grades because their peers perceive that achieving academically is “acting white.” The theoretical model distinguishes between two types of minority groups: voluntary and involuntary minorities. ‘Voluntary’ minorities are those that come to this country seeking to improve their

socio-economic and/or political lives. In contrast, ‘involuntary’ minorities are those who have become members of American society through less desirable means, such as enslavement, colonization or conquest. African Americans, Native Americans and Mexicans all fit into the latter category.

The Oppositional Culture explanation hypothesizes that: 1) involuntary minorities perceive that obtaining an education will result in fewer returns because of the inequities of the social structure; 2) involuntary minorities have a greater resistance to school than white students; 3) high achieving involuntary minority students experience negative peer pressure by their intra-group peers due to academic achievement; and 4) involuntary minorities’ resistance to school is a major determinant in the gaps in academic performance between involuntary minority students and their white colleagues or even members of voluntary minority groups, such as immigrants from East and South Asia.

Other researchers have contradicted Ogbu’s assertions and found that there is no significant difference between Black students’ attitudes toward school and their white counterparts, in contrast Black students hold attitudes toward school that are at least as positive as those found in students from other racial groups, and some studies suggest that in fact African-American students hold a more positive attitude toward school than those of other racial groups (Ainsworth-Darnell & Downey, 1998; Mickelson, 1990; Lundy & Firebaugh, 2005).

Lundy & Firebaugh’s study (2005) revealed that there is often a discrepancy between a student’s attitude toward school and that student’s academic behaviors, a finding supported by others (Mickelson 1990). In fact, African Americans had the most positive attitudes of all racial/ethnic groups studied toward education; however, their academic behaviors were least consistent with their more positive academic attitudes. The study concludes that ‘resistance to

school' may be more significant for gender differences than ethnic/racial differences. The results showed that across all racial groups the difference between girls and boys was significant where differences across ethnic and racial lines were statistically insignificant.

Mickelson's study (1990) found similarities with the Lundy & Firebaugh study regarding 'involuntary' minority students holding a more positive attitude toward school, but that their academic behaviors do not match their stated positive attitudes. Mickelson's explanation for the differences between attitude and achievement rest in what she termed the 'attitude-achievement paradox,' which is explained as a difference between the 'abstract' and 'concrete' attitudes held by students. The definition of an 'abstract' attitude offered by Mickelson is that of accepting the generalized promise that obtaining an education is a key factor for economic success and social mobility. Simultaneously, there are 'concrete' attitudes that reveal a very different reality. The concrete attitude, Mickelson explains, is an expression of what is perceived as the actual benefits and returns that minorities receive with respect to the returns that others like them enjoy upon obtaining an education. This attitude is shaped by the perception that members of certain groups often receive less money, fewer job opportunities, and discrepancies in promotions as compared to middle-class white men with similar, and sometimes less, educational credentials.

Ainsworth-Darnell & Downey's (1998) study, like the two previous studies discussed, also found no support for the oppositional culture model's claims that African American students perceive fewer returns to education and more limited occupational opportunities than do whites. With regard to each of the four claims made by the Oppositional Culture Model, this quantitative, survey-based study contradicts all four claims. There was no support found that involuntary minorities perceive lower returns to education and more limited occupational career opportunities than do other students from nonminority groups. It was found that African

American students were much more likely to maintain pro-school attitudes compared to white students. In fact, the study found that rather than suffering negative sanctions from peers, African Americans who were academically successful were held in higher regard than white students. African American students were more likely to report more positive values among their peers about school than white students. Finally, it was found that overall African American students do not hold a more resistant attitude toward school than white students.

These studies all highlight the consistent level of resistance toward school across all racial groups, yet race continues to be a powerful predictor of academic achievement. Evidence does not support, as Ogbu (1978) theorizes, that the disparities in educational attainment and resulting differences in dropout rates are the result of undue oppositional attitudes toward school by Blacks.

An important alternative consideration to explain the differences in academic achievement and graduation rates between racial and ethnic groups may be found in the *form* of resistance displayed by individual students. The studies discussed above, and much of the resistance research, focuses on ‘self-defeating resistance’ in which students’ attitudes and actions incriminate them in their own struggles academically (Delgado Bernal, 1997; Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001).

In a study by Dolores Delgado-Bernal (1997) she identifies four different types of student oppositional behavior or resistance, and in her descriptions of the various forms of resistance she examines two dimensions, the degree with which there’s a critique of the social system, and whether the resistance contains elements of social justice. Her descriptions are variations of the concepts introduced by Henry Giroux’s work on resistance (Giroux, 1983) that identifies two intersecting dimensions of student resistance; 1) students must have a critique of social

oppression, and 2) students must be motivated by an interest in social justice (Solorzano & Bernal, 2001). In Delgado-Bernal's version she offers an expanded view that includes four quadrants: a) reactionary behavior (no critique/no social justice); b) self-defeating resistance (some critique/no social justice); c) conformist resistance (no critique/some social justice); and d) transformational resistance (critique and social justice). This delineation of varying forms of resistance is important because it may help to explain why more African-American students eventually drop out of high school, despite the fact that their level of resistance is no greater than that of other groups. It may be that the way these students express their resistance falls more frequently into categories of reactionary and self-defeating behavior, where social justice is not a component. This leads me to hypothesize that African-American males may become more academically persistent if empowered with a deeper and clearer understanding of the roles that schools play in the maintenance of economic and social inequities, and are informed about ways to resist that are more self-empowering and transformative.

My hope is that elements of this research study eventually reach student hands and help students to consider alternative resistance strategies which inspire them to “a) confront any negative perceptions or ideas that others hold about them; b) become motivated to disprove the negative perceptions or ideas; and c) begin to employ successful strategies that allow them to navigate through the educational system for their improvement” (Solorzano & Bernal, 2001, p. 319). It is my contention that the enlightened words of pioneering rap artists may be able to assist in accomplishing this task.

Resistance theory will be an important conceptual framework for the in-depth interviews to be conducted with the research participants of this study because it will allow for participants to identify the forms of resistance they or their peers displayed, if any, and more importantly, it

will allow for a discussion of morphing some of the more negative types of resistance (i.e. self-defeating and reactionary) to more positive forms of resistance (i.e. conformist and transformational) that may result in improved academic results.

The next section will look at several elements of Self-Efficacy Theory¹, specifically the concepts of agency, reciprocal causation and social interactions, as they help to inform the research question, in what ways, if any, do Hip-Hop artists promote self-efficacy toward educational attainment in African American males?

¹ Self-efficacy: “refers to beliefs in one’s capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required for producing desired effects.”

Self-Efficacy

While studies have shown that Black males underperform compared to those from other racial and ethnic demographic groups, one potential difficulty in addressing this issue is the possible misperception that one is attempting to blame the ‘victims’ by questioning their role in their own motivation, engagement, and effort in academic pursuits. As a result, a multitude of explanations have been offered for the gaps in academic achievement and the resulting disproportionate high school dropout rates between students of color and students from other racial and ethnic backgrounds. There are those who have argued that the disparities result from racial differences in intelligence (Hernstein & Murray, 2004). Researcher A.J. Martin referenced other contributors to student motivation and academic success including the quality and appropriateness of the pedagogy they receive, the relationships they have with their teachers, parents’ attitudes and expectations for their children, peers, class climate, school culture and structure, socio-demographic status, gender, and age (Martin, 2001, 2003).

Whenever a failure or success occurs individuals typically seek to analyze the situation to determine the perceived causes for the failure or success (Weiner, 1986). Recognizing that there are, in fact, a variety of reasons for the academic under-performance of Black students, I would like to address potential solutions that do not rest externally, on the actions of school systems, including teachers and others, but are internally controlled by young people themselves. Research reveals that individuals who rely on external regulation persist much less than those who are intrinsically motivated (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Leading to the conclusion that if something is to be done about the high school dropout problem, it must involve a change in the attitudes and efforts of students, and not rely solely on school structures and personnel.

Under the umbrella of social cognitive theory, there are several related theories that discuss

similarly related ideas. Among them are self-efficacy, self-regulation, motivation and self-determination theories (self-concept, expectancy beliefs, performance expectancies, self-perceptions of ability, confidence). I have decided to concentrate on self-efficacy because it has been determined to be an important, but not the only, influence on academic achievement. Other important influences are skills, knowledge, outcome expectations, and perceived value. High efficacy will not produce competent performances when necessary skills and knowledge have not been attained. Outcome expectations are beliefs about the anticipated consequences of actions. They are important because students do not participate in activities they believe will lead to negative outcomes. Value refers to students' beliefs about the importance of learning or what use will be made of what they learn. Value beliefs affect behavior because learners show little interest in activities they do not value (Schunk, 2003).

Self-efficacy has been found to be positively related to higher levels of academic achievement and learning, increased student cognitive engagement and their use of self-regulatory strategies (similar to study skills), as well as general achievement as indexed by grades (Pintrich & De Groot, 1990; Bandura, 1997; Pintrich & Schunk, 2002). Higher levels of efficacy beliefs have also been found to help determine how much effort people will expend on an activity, how long they will persevere when confronted by obstacles, and how resilient they will be when faced with adverse situations (Pajares, 1996), all of which possess the potential to influence high school dropout and graduation rates.

Agency

The concept of agency is an important aspect of self-efficacy theory. Human agency can be defined as the confidence and skills to act on one's own behalf (Solorzano & Solorzano, 1995). In order for students to eventually struggle to transform the educational systems within

which they struggle to succeed, they must be able to perceive those systems “not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which they can transform” (Freire, 1970). As leading self-efficacy scholar, Professor Albert Bandura commented, “Among the mechanisms of agency, none is more central or pervasive than beliefs of personal efficacy. Unless people believe they can produce desired effects by their actions, they have little incentive to act. Efficacy belief, therefore, is a major basis of action” (Bandura, 1997, p. 2).

As early as the 1930’s, renowned scholar Carter G. Woodson in his seminal work, *The Miseducation of the Negro* commented, “to handicap a student by teaching him...that his struggle to change his condition is hopeless is the worst sort of lynching. It kills one’s aspirations and dooms him to vagabondage and crime.” (Woodson, 1933, p. 2) True to Woodson’s assessment over 80 years ago, many minority youth today continue to express feelings of hopelessness, alienation, apathy and despair, which frequently arise when individuals falsely believe that they are incapable of changing the systems and structures that affect their lives, eventually leading to a disincentive to act (Bandura, 1997). On the contrary, when students are empowered with a sense of agency in their ability to individually and collectively improve their lives by impacting the systems and structures that are in place individuals are more prone to act on their own behalf (Bandura, 1997).

Bi-Directionality of Influence

Black males, particularly those from the inner cities, are frequently described as being ‘products of their environments.’ However, in self-efficacy theory, in an important concept referred to as ‘reciprocal causation,’ there is a recognized bi-directionality of influence between behavior and environmental circumstances, where people are considered both *products* and *producers* of their environments. Since personal agency is socially rooted and operates within

socio-cultural influences, individuals, it is argued, can affect the nature of their environment both by the selection and creation of various situations (Bandura, 1989; Pajares, 1996). It is a concept which borrows from the Marxist tradition, “The materialist doctrine that men are products of circumstances and upbringing, and that, therefore, changed men are products of other circumstances and changed upbringing, forgets that it is men that change circumstances...” (Marx & Engels, 1968; as referenced in Freire, 1970). Because of an individual’s capacity for self-regulation and self-determination, people are considered at least partial architects of their own destinies. Reciprocal causation provides individuals and communities with opportunities to display a measure of control over their destinies (Bandura, 1997).

While the concept of bi-directionality is important, Albert Bandura identifies that self-efficacy requires the development of certain skills and capabilities for exercising self-regulation. These include the capabilities to exercise control and to influence one’s own motivation and actions (Bandura, 1989).

In a study discussing motivation and self-regulated learning in academic performance, conducted by researchers Paul Pintrich and Elizabeth DeGroot, they identified three components to self-regulated learning: 1) Student’s meta-cognitive strategies for planning, monitoring, and modifying their cognition. 2) Student’s management and control of their effort on classroom academic tasks. 3) Cognitive strategies that students use to learn, remember, and understand the material (Pintrich & De Groot, 1990).

In the model presented by Pintrich & De Groot in what is termed the expectancy-value model of motivation, there are three motivational components that they suggest may be connected to the different components of self regulated learning mentioned above: a) an expectancy component, which includes students’ beliefs about their ability to perform a task, b) a

value component, which includes students' goals and beliefs about the importance and interest of the task, and c) an affective component, which includes students' emotional reactions to the task (Pintrich & De Groot, 1990).

Their findings suggest that self-efficacy played a facilitative role with respect to cognitive engagement, but that cognitive engagement was more directly tied to actual performance. The implication being that students' learning different cognitive and self-regulatory strategies may be more important for improving actual performance on classroom academic tasks, but that improving students' self-efficacy beliefs may lead to greater use of the cognitive strategies. The development of these cognitive skills and strategies allows individuals to make better decisions and choose appropriate actions to take advantage of available opportunities and to resist social traps.

Bandura argues that efficacious people are more likely to take advantage of positive opportunities, and to develop alternative ways to elude societal and institutional pitfalls, or change them via collective action (Bandura, 1997). However, attributions to external factors, has been shown to hinder the acquisition of the necessary strategies, because external attributions provide little reason for children to learn strategies (Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2002). These concepts are important to my work because once societal and institutional pitfalls are identified, past and present Hip-Hop artists can play a major role in bringing attention to the pitfalls, and publicizing the collective action that needs to be taken to overcome them.

Social interactions

A third aspect of self-efficacy theory which applies to my study is the claim of self-efficacy theorists that individuals gain large amounts of valuable knowledge socially, and therefore prominent people in the lives of children have the potential to contribute significantly

to what and how children think about important matters, including school (Bandura, 1986).

Individuals, especially young people, can develop strong attitudes, feelings, values and behaviors toward people or places without having experienced it themselves, merely from observing consequences and experiences of someone that they hold in high regard. As a general rule, people are inclined to do things they have seen succeed and avoid those they have seen fail. Students can acquire efficacy beliefs from comparisons with those of others (models, peers), with those with similar backgrounds and characteristics, in attributes such as age, gender, ethnicity, and perceived competence, offering the best basis for comparison (Bandura, 1986; Schunk, 1987; Schunk, 2003). The more alike observers are to models, the greater the chances that similar actions by observers are important and will produce comparable results. Similarity is highly influential when students have experienced difficulties and have doubts about performing well (Schunk, 2003).

Young observers may learn to fear, dislike and devalue those things that bothered their models before them (Bandura, 1988b; Mineka, 1987). In a similar way, fears and dislikes can be lessened, in situations where influential models express information about strategies to persevere and overcome (Bandura, 1982, 1989).

These points suggest that peer models may have more impact on students than teacher models. Models provide information about what sequence of actions will lead to success and which actions have undesirable consequences. Models can raise efficacy among observers who are apt to believe that they, too, will be successful if they follow the same behavior themselves or to avoid performing it (Schunk, 2003). Conversely, modeling influences that enhance perceived self-efficacy can weaken the impact of direct experiences of failure by sustaining performance in the face of repeated failure (Bandura, 1986). These concepts are critical to my work because they

point to the potential that rap artists, past and present, could have on young observers, fans, and even parents who look to them as influential role models on transforming attitudes, feelings, values and behaviors toward school, and developing strategies to persevere and overcome institutional and societal difficulties.

The next section will review a central component of critical theory, the idea of critical consciousness, which underlies the premise for my study's use of popular Hip-Hop artists. Critical theory is important to this study because it makes the current realities of underachievement of African-American students an object of reflection seeking to critically recognize its causes, and from that reflection and critique can come the necessary transforming action that can create a new situation (Freire, 1970). Critical theory helps to frame the research question, in what ways, if any, Hip-Hop artists critique the educational system and offer ideas for its transformation?

Critical Theory

"They schools can't teach us shit. My people need freedom, we trying to get all we can get...Tellin' me white mans lies straight bullshit. They schools ain't teaching us what we need to survive, they schools don't educate, all they teach people is lies."

Dead Prez

Central to the rationale and purposes of this study are concepts from critical theory, and a particularly important reference will be made to the seminal work of preeminent critical theorist Paulo Freire (1970). Despite substantial differences in the dates, distance and demographics between Freire's work with impoverished farm workers in rural Brazil, similarities can be drawn and lessons learned between that community and the sample population for this study. Critical

theory² incorporates multiple concepts, chief among them is the concept of critical consciousness/storytelling for oppressed communities.

Critical Consciousness

Critical theorists recognize that before oppressive systems and situations can be overcome there must first be a general raising of consciousness amongst the people to recognize the causes of the oppression before realistic, transformative action can be enacted (Freire, 1970). One way in which Hip-Hop artists have served as useful vehicles transmitting empowering messages has been through their song lyrics. This approach, known in critical theory as counter-storytelling, involves telling the story of those experiences that are often neglected, and/or may serve as tools to challenge the dominant stories of those in power with interests in maintaining the status quo (Delgado, 1989; Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). Rappers have traditionally used their song lyrics as a way to discuss issues and enlighten listeners to perspectives on society rarely taken seriously. Rap pioneer Chuck D asserts, “Rap records are direct speaking, unfiltered direct speaking. It’s self-description... Whether it’s positive or negative... They dictate how we’re living. It’s the black CNN that we never had” (Delgado, 1989; Eure & Aldrich, 1991).

Rap artists’ use of counter-narratives can serve several pivotal functions in challenging traditional ways of viewing the world, texts, and theories (Akom, 2009; Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). Among the important functions counter-storytelling serves are:

- “a) They can build community among those at the margins of society by putting a human and familiar face to educational theory and practice; b) they can challenge the perceived wisdom of those at society’s center; c) they can open new windows

² Critical Theory is being defined here as “an attempt to understand the oppressive aspects of society in order to generate societal and individual transformation” (Solorzano & Delgado-Bernal, 2001).

into the reality of those at the margins of society by showing the possibilities beyond the ones they live and to show that they are not alone in their position; d) they can teach others that by combining elements from both the story and the current reality, one can construct another world that is richer than either the story or the reality alone; and e) they can provide a context to understand and transform established belief systems.” (Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001; Delgado, 1989).

As Paulo Freire suggests, “As long as the oppressed remain unaware of the causes of their condition, they fatalistically accept their exploitation” (Freire, 1970). One purpose of the interviews to be conducted in this study will be to allow African-American rap artists to tell their stories, share their experiences and develop collective meanings of the purposes and effects of the educational system which can then be shared with the general public in order to help raise the consciousness regarding purposes and effects, critiques, and ways to transform the American educational system. One challenge upon completion of this study will be to find meaningful ways to share this information with parents and youth in a form outside of rap lyrics so that it can be taken seriously and acted upon.

In previous sections I discussed elements of Resistance theory and the ways in which it offers insight into the problem of academic underachievement and high school dropouts for African-American male students. I also discussed elements of Self-Efficacy Theory and its potential role in the academic success and challenges of African-American male students. In this section I discussed aspects of Critical theory, to provide a context for the value of being able to critique a social problem as a prerequisite to generate change.

While Resistance, Self Efficacy, and Critical theories are not new, and have been used by other researchers to better understand the issues of academic underachievement and high school

dropouts for minority populations, my approach of utilizing these theories as a conceptual framework combined with an element of popular culture that is highly influential with urban youth of color will contribute a unique perspective on the issues surrounding high school dropouts, and the transformation of the public education system that has not been fully analyzed. Hip-Hop music and culture is replete with its share of urban intellectuals, contrary to some stereotypes, and the addition of revered Hip-Hop thinkers to the long discussed problems of educational reform particularly as it affects African-American male students is, in my view, long overdue.

Hip-Hop and Its Influence on Youth Attitudes

It is my contention and the rationale for this study that the genuine, authentic words of Hip-Hop artists have power to generate critical praxis, involving both reflection and transformative action (Freire, 1970). While much of what rap artists traditionally discuss in mainstream media outlets could be described as superficial in nature, integral to this research project will be delving deeply into the shared experiences, ideas and beliefs of some of the world's most recognized and celebrated musical artists about the power and potential to transform educational realities for large populations of youth.

Now I will offer a clarifying definition of the term Hip-Hop, and illuminate its importance in the lives of young people as a potential tool in the development of critical thinking and progressive action (Stovall, 2006).

Hip-Hop, which is often commonly misunderstood as a pseudonym for the musical form known as rap music, is much more than a musical genre. Hip-Hop, as defined by practitioners and scholars has been identified as a lifestyle which includes various aspects of youth culture. It

generally is understood to consist of four elements; Dee-jay (music/beats), MC (lyricist), Break-dancing and Graffiti (art) (Forman & Neal, 2004; Land & Stovall, 2009). My focus will be on the creators of what has become the most prolific aspect of Hip-Hop culture, the rapper.

Hip-Hop was born from the milieu of Afro-Caribbean, African-American, and Latino communities in New York City's South Bronx, and spread rapidly to other parts of the City in the mid- to late '70s (Au, 2005). Hip-Hop today has become a youth cultural phenomenon that has spread all over the globe.

Many educators and researchers agree that it has become one of the dominant languages in youth culture, especially amongst inner city youth, and because of that, some scholars and academics suggest that educators who work with the youth need to be able to speak in a language that the youth understand (Akom, 2009; Mahiri, 2000).

Since Hip-Hop has become such an important part of the lives of young people, it has naturally found a growing usefulness in the classroom (Akom, 2009; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2005). Most commonly, classroom teachers have used rap in English courses as a point of interest and entry, as well as a bridge to Standard English texts and the teaching of literary genres and strategies (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2000; Mahiri, 1998). Those educators and researchers who have examined Hip-Hop's potential have consistently adhered to two major themes: using rap to bridge the cultural divide that exists between schools and students' home and community cultures (Ginwright, 2004; Mahiri, 1998; Morrell, 2002; Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2002; Quintero & Cooks, 2002); and using rap as a tool for developing critical consciousness among students (Ginwright, 2004; Morrell, 2002; Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2002; Land & Stovall, 2009). Some researchers seizing on its importance have suggested the use

of Hip-Hop to address socio-political issues such as race, gender, class, and sexuality (Ladson-Billings, 1994).

Most often, when Hip-Hop is being analyzed for its ability to assist students and teachers with the educational purposes stated earlier, rap lyrics are utilized as the primary method of analysis. Outside of published interviews and the few books written by rap artists, very little else exists that would allow for others to know what rap artists think or feel about current events affecting their lives and communities. Unfortunately, the lyrics of a rap song, no matter how conscious, are often not the primary reason fans list for liking a rap song, but rather the defining element for whether a rap song is listened to is the beat (Eure & Aldrich, 1991; Stovall, 2006).

In a study which examined 37 rap songs released between the years 1989 to March, 2004 (Au, 2005), the lyrics were analyzed for references to key words relating to education including; “school,” “education,” “teachers,” “diplomas,” “classrooms,” “lunchrooms,” “hallways,” “books,” or “playground”. The study revealed common critiques and/or themes from the lyrical content analysis:

- Schools do not provide content deemed worthwhile.
- Schools do not teach the skills necessary for economic survival.
- Schools are associated with enforcing/teaching whiteness.
- Schools do not pedagogically engage or interest students.
- The school curriculum is full of racist lies and miseducation

Au’s findings are by no means groundbreaking, it does point to a critically important paradigm shift raised by the researcher — a shift in perspective from that of researchers and teachers to that of the rappers themselves, providing an opportunity to understand the complexities with which the current generation of rappers interact with the system of education (Au, 2005).

While I agree with Au’s criticism of the current educational discourse, and his suggestion

that a paradigm shift is required from researchers and teachers to youth voices, the lyrics of rap artists themselves are not exhaustive enough to give a full and accurate portrayal of the complex attitudes members of the Hip-Hop community hold towards the myriad of educational issues.

One source of data conspicuously absent from the research regarding Hip-Hop to this point has been the rap artists themselves. First and foremost rap artists are human beings, and the majority of the research has concentrated on the rap lyrics rappers have written, to the exclusion of their lives. This exclusion is partly due to the fact that rappers are celebrities who usually guard aspects of their personal lives and experiences.

Ultimately, Hip-Hop culture may provide, vis-à-vis rap artists, with their shared experiences, attitudes, ideas and beliefs, a place where theory and practice unite and become a tool for identifying and naming systemic educational problems. These artists may additionally offer important steps in raising the consciousness of oppressed and exploited populations (Freire, 1970), insightful analysis of causes for disproportionate educational failure, and most importantly, organize all stakeholders to elicit solutions around the issue of educational attainment and excellence (Freire, 1970; Akom, 2009; Smith-Maddox & Solorzano, 2002).

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

There is general agreement that Black male students earn lower grades, drop out more often, and attain less education than do students from other ethnic and racial groups (Mickelson, 1990; Carpenter et al, 2007), but there is general disagreement about the reasons for these differences. One central focus of this study will be to capture the shared experiences and perceptions of a sample of professional rap artists regarding their experiences within the public schools and strategies to reform the public education system so that African American males can increase their rates of academic success. This chapter will explain the research methodology used in order to address the following research questions:

1. What experiences, beliefs, and perceptions do Hip-Hop artists articulate about education, it's potential and purpose?
2. In what ways, if any, do Hip-Hop artists critique the educational system and offer ideas for its transformation?
3. In what ways, if any, do Hip-Hop artists promote self-efficacy toward educational attainment in African American high school males?

Research Design

Much of the literature regarding Hip-Hop and its relationship to the education system has sought to find ways to use the popular artistic form to serve two major purposes: a) as a bridge to traditional school curriculum by increasing student engagement (Ginwright, 2004; Mahiri, 1998; Morrell, 2002; Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2002; Quintero & Cooks, 2002); and b) as a tool for developing critical consciousness among students (Ginwright, 2004; Morrell, 2002; Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2002; Land & Stovall, 2009).

For various reasons, there is much that rap artists have experienced and believe that has not been included in their songs for public consumption. Due to the nature of my research

questions, I utilized a qualitative research design because it allowed for a more comprehensive look into the attitudes, beliefs, and experiences of Hip-Hop artists, specifically as they relate to the educational system. The in-depth interviews provide an exploration of the shared experiences and meanings the participants made of their experiences (Seidman, 2006). A quantitative, non-experimental design such as surveys would not have been appropriate for this type of study mainly because the sample universe of Hip-Hop artists is much too small for the results of such a study to be generalized and replicated from the sample to larger populations (Cresswell, 2009).

Rationale for Sample Population

The sample population consists of ten Hip-Hop artists who were selected by a qualitative sampling method known as snowball sampling. With snowball sampling a study sample is obtained through referrals made among people who share or know others with a particular characteristic. Snowball sampling is usually used when the targeted population does not have high social visibility or is difficult to locate (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). I started the referral process with several Hip-Hop artists that I had worked with previously, and through them, I was able to obtain referrals to the other artists that agreed to participate in the study. While I initially wanted the sample criteria to include factors identified by Maxwell (2005) as important for sample selection; representativeness, heterogeneity, and extreme cases, the snowball sampling technique did not allow for that, a positive occurrence in hindsight. All of the participants come from the New York metropolitan area where the public schools have experienced major problems successfully educating minority populations despite their majority minority student enrollment (Orfield et al., 2004), and where recent studies document that the graduation rates for the 2007-2008 cohort of African-American male students were at a horrifying 25%, the worst in

the nation (Holzman, 2010). Ironically, it is this same New York that is generally recognized as the genesis for the music and culture known as Hip-Hop.

These study participants or the groups that they were members of are all considered legends and/or pioneers of Hip-Hop. If there were an established Hip-Hop Hall of Fame, all ten participants, would unquestionably be inductees. The participants interviewed, in the order in which the interviews were conducted are Kool Moe Dee, Kurtis Blow, Chuck D (Public Enemy), DMC (Run-DMC), LA Sunshine (The Treacherous Three), DLB (Fearless Four), Paradise (X-Clan), Big Daddy Kane, Sadat X (Brand Nubians), and Jalil (Whodini). The following table (Table 1) gives additional demographic details and career highlights of study participants. In a few cases the participants were popular before Hip-Hop became widely popular and accepted as a viable music genre by the music industry. Therefore, a few participants have a limited number of album releases and sales, due to the fact that in the early days of Hip-Hop the accepted trend was to release singles. However, their status as pioneers and legends in the Hip-Hop genre are unmistakable.

Eight out of the ten (80%) participants are high school graduates, and seven of the ten (70%) attended at least some college. Three of the ten (30%) actually graduated from college, with one going on to obtain a graduate degree in education. Five of the ten (50%) participants, although not formally trained in education, have held a job in education at some point in their lives. Positions held include teacher's aide, school dean, teacher, and Assistant Principal in either a public, charter, or alternative school environment.

Table 1: Participant Demographics

Artist	Schools Attended	Career Timeline/Highlights (partial listing)
Kool Moe Dee (b. August 8, 1962 in NYC)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • State University of New York College at Old Westbury • Norman Thomas High School • JHS 143 • PS 129 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interlude ('94) • Funke, Funke Wisdom ('91) • 1991- Grammy Album of the Year, Back on the Block w/ Quincy Jones • Knowledge is King ('89)- Gold • How Ya Like Me Now ('87)- Platinum • Solo ('86) • Part of Treacherous Three (1981-1985)
Kurtis Blow (b. August 9, 1959 in Harlem, NY)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cty College of New York (CCNY) • High School of Music and Art • JHS 143 • PS 192 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • First rapper to sign with a major record label, Mercury • 'The Breaks' ('80) first certified gold rap song • Back by Popular Demand ('88) • Kingdom Blow ('86) • America ('85) • Ego Trip ('84) • The Best Rapper on the Scene ('83) • Tough ('82) • Deuce ('81) • Kurtis Blow ('80)
Chuck D (Public Enemy) (b. August 1, 1960 in Queens, NY)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adelphi University • W.T. Clark H.S. • Roosevelt High School 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Rolling Stone Magazine</i> ranked Public Enemy number 44 on its list of the Greatest Artists of All Time • Public Enemy's "Fight the Power" plays a central role in Spike Lee's 1989 film "Do the Right Thing" • Apocalypse '91 ('91) • Fear of a Black Planet ('90) • It Takes A Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back ('89) • Yo! Bum Rush the Show ('87)
DMC (Run-DMC) (b. May 31, 1964 in Queens, NY)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • St. John's University • Rice H.S. • St. Pascual's Baylon 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2009 Inductees into Rock 'N Roll Hall of Fame • First group with gold album (Run-DMC, 1984) • First with a platinum record (King of Rock, 1985) • Named 'The Greatest Hip-Hop Group of All Time' by MTV.com • Ranked 48 on <i>Rolling Stone's</i> list of the greatest musical artists of all time
LA Sunshine (Treacherous Three)	N/A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One of the first Hip-Hop acts to gain mainstream acceptance • The Treacherous Three ('84) • Old School Flava ('94)
DLB (Fearless Four) (b. April 25, 1960's, Harlem, NY)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SUNY College at Old Westbury • Martin Luther King Jr. HS • JHS 43, Adam Clayton Powell Jr. School • PS 129, John H. Finley 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Best known for 1982 single "Rockin' It" • Collaborated with Kurtis Blow to produce the single "Problems of the World" • "Creepin' Up On Ya" (1994)
Paradise (X-Clan) (b. Bronx, NY)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Brooklyn Tech • CJHS 145 • PS 73 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Xodus (1992) • To the East Blackwards (1990)
Big Daddy Kane (b. September 10, 1968, Brooklyn, NY)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sarah J. Hale HS • JHS 117 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • MTV ranked No. 7 in their <i>Greatest MCs Of All Time</i> • Daddy's Home ('94) • Looks Like A Job For... ('93) • Prince of Darkness ('91) • Taste of Chocolate ('90) • It's a Big Daddy Thing ('89) • Long Live the Kane ('88)
Sadat X (Brand Nubians) (b. December 29, 1968 in Harlem, NY)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Salinas High school • Daniel Webster JHS 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Foundation ('98) • Everything is Everything ('94) • In God We Trust ('93) • One For All ('90)
Jalil (Whodini) (b. Brooklyn, NY)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New York Community College • Alexander Hamilton High School 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Six (1996) • Bag-a-Trix (1991) • Open Sesame (1987) • Back in Black (1986) • Escape (1984)- Platinum • Whodini (1983)

Data Collection and Analysis

My study utilized a multi-case, narrative, in-depth interview approach. I used a digital recording device to record the interviews, which lasted from 30-45 minutes. Given that the purpose of the interviews was to have participants reconstruct their educational experience and offer ideas on improving schools and educational experiences for other minority youth, the length of the interviews seemed appropriate (Seidman, 2006). I utilized a list of pre-developed, open-ended questions, with additional follow-up questions as needed to examine issues more deeply when appropriate (See Appendix A for interview protocol). This strategy, which builds upon and explores participants' responses, allowed for open sharing about experiences and attitudes about school, as well as ideas and suggestions for transforming them. It also allowed for the collection of participant ideas and experiences about school, issues and items for critique, and ways to create an agenda for school reform.

The philosophical theories used in formulating the interview questions were derived from resistance theory, critical pedagogy (i.e. counter-storytelling), and social cognitive theory (i.e. self-efficacy theory). I also brought a blended Social Constructivist/Advocacy Worldview to this topic by allowing research participants to express their views on the high school dropout problem, as well as the educational system in general, but with peculiar interest in addressing such issues as empowerment, motivation, inequality and alienation.

All of the interviews except one (Chuck D) were conducted over the telephone due to distance and scheduling conflicts. For telephone interviews I used a speakerphone to project participant responses so that they could be recorded. Transcribed interviews were sent to the artists for their review and to check for accuracy of transcription relative to facts and intent.

In analyzing the data the following options, identified by Maxwell (2005), were used: 1) categorizing strategies (coding and thematic analysis); and 2) connecting strategies.

Transcribed interviews were coded and analyzed for patterns and themes related to the respondents answers, which were then rearranged into categories. As each research question has a distinct focus, educational experiences (RQ#1), institutional critiques (RQ#2), and self-efficacy (RQ#3), the data was organized into subcategories under these major themes. The data was also analyzed for broader themes and issues that were not established or anticipated in advance but grew out of the interviews.

Ethical Considerations & Validity

In conducting this study I emphasized my role as a graduate student, and I also divulged my experience as co-author of several books on Hip-Hop. My experience working with other respected Hip-Hop artists gave me a level of credibility and trust which was essential in getting the artists to open up about their personally held ideas, beliefs, and attitudes about the educational system, as well as feeling comfortable to share their reconstructed personal experiences with school.

While my prior experience working with rap artists was helpful in granting me access, it may have also caused a bit of ‘bias’ and ‘reflexivity’ (Maxwell, 2005) in my research participants. The rap artists with whom I worked previously, generally possess a critical social and political perspective, and research participants may have assumed that I was looking for certain types of experiences or answers to the interview questions. In order to guard against that bias, I stressed to each participant prior to the actual interview that they were selected because of an interest in pursuing a variety of views and experiences on the topic. I also attempted to follow-up critical statements about educators or the educational system with questions about improving the system or for suggestions to improve matters and not simply criticize them. While

it was unavoidable that what the research participants said was influenced by me, I attempted to ask questions that were not leading or biased (Maxwell, 2005).

Finally, while my participants are public figures, their personal educational experiences and views are not, nor are their ideas and beliefs about the education system. A major concern of mine was in the handling of stories participants shared about negative teachers, or toxic school administrators and environments without revealing the identities of the people or places discussed. The possibility exists that with a little research a person could ascertain which city, and specifically, the name of the public schools attended by my participants. With a little additional research one may be able to positively identify individuals mentioned or referenced in the interview. For this reason, I masked the names of people, places, and activities in consideration of the importance in IRB proceedings to protect the rights of human participants and cause no harm.

As a researcher, I employed several strategies suggested by Cresswell (2009) to ensure the study is credible. I made sure to clearly identify my theoretical orientation and my reasons for sample selection.

As a final measure to ensure credibility and overall efficacy of the interviews, I allowed the research participants to check the accuracy of the data (interviews) after they were transcribed so that they could determine if they were accurate representations of their views.

By following this methodological approach, I believe I was able to answer the identified research questions with a degree of thoroughness and confidence. In the next chapter I report the findings of the qualitative study.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

Summary:

This chapter will report the findings of my study, which draws from ten in-depth interviews where current and former professional Hip-Hop artists discuss their views on the current state of the educational system and offer ideas for educational transformation. The participants interviewed, in the order in which the interviews were conducted are Kool Moe Dee, Kurtis Blow, Chuck D (Public Enemy), DMC (Run-DMC), LA Sunshine (The Treacherous Three), DLB (Fearless Four), Paradise (X-Clan), Big Daddy Kane, Sadat X (Brand Nubians), and Jalil (Whodini).

The findings that follow are organized by theme as they address the three research questions developed as the basis of the study. The first research question that findings will be reported on is; what **experiences**, **beliefs**, and **perceptions** do Hip-Hop artists articulate about education, its potential and purpose?

The findings will follow the first research question, namely the experiences, beliefs and perceptions that the participants hold about education. In this section participants address their thoughts about learning and their personal experiences in school, the perceived importance and priority for obtaining an education for future success, the source of inspiration for educational success, and the influence of their peers and larger community regarding educational attainment.

Beliefs

In this study a belief is defined as something one accepts as true or real; a firmly held opinion or conviction. Participants did not express the view that attaining an education was the singular answer to future success, however they did overwhelmingly believe and agree that the

benefits of obtaining an education, both in the short term and long term, were well worth the time, effort, and sacrifice.

Importance/Priority for Future

All participants (10 of 10) expressed the belief that obtaining an education was important and should be a priority for the future. Although the reasons for its importance varied from being a tool to fight off poverty, to doing well in school so that one would be able to enjoy the freedoms of being a kid, there were no participants that held the belief that obtaining an education was not a valuable goal. The most commonly held belief about education was that it is a minimally necessary component to improving one's chances of living a productive life in society. Chuck D's comment expresses the general tone of the responses in this area, "Education is learning how to swim in this society. You don't learn how to swim in a deep body of water, you sink to the bottom and drown... That's what this society is, society is an ocean of mishap, and also it's an ocean of opportunity. Mishap if you have no education, you can't swim, you fall to the bottom like a rock, gurgling and drowning on your surroundings. If you're in an ocean if you're drowning, you're drowning on your surroundings." While all participants expressed positive beliefs about school's importance, the reality is that not all personally had positive experiences with school, however the prevailing theme in those situations was that the key was to 'weather the basics' and 'stay in the game' long enough to obtain the goal. This belief is best expressed by KLB as he recalled a conversation between his father and an older brother who was struggling in school with a teacher, and complained to his father during a ride home. DLB recalled saying to his older brother from the back seat of his father's car, "You need to understand, whether the teacher likes you or not, the teacher has his education! You're there to

get yours.” While some raised questions about the practicality and usefulness of some of the information obtained in school on a personal level, none questioned the importance of completing the process.

The unanimous belief among participants that obtaining an education is critical to improving social and economic status in the long run is confirmed by many studies, including the study entitled, *The Silent Epidemic*, which concludes that high school dropouts earn an average of \$9,200 less than high school graduates per year, and close to \$1 million less over the course of their lives (Bridgeland, Dilulio, Morison, 2006). The participants in this study have clearly internalized this economic message about the social impact of obtaining an education. This is significant because it problematizes the claims and negative stereotypes made by some that African American males do not care about obtaining an education.

Parental Inspiration

Another significant finding was the important role parents held in shaping the belief that school and obtaining an education were important. Seven of the ten participants (70%) expressed that their parents played a major role in inspiring them to continue with their educational pursuits. Parental inspiration came in several forms; serving as role models by attending and graduating from college themselves, to participants desirous to please their families by being the first to graduate from high school and proceed to college, to parents verbally motivating and instilling in their sons the confidence and belief that they were capable of achieving a worthwhile goal. In Big Daddy Kane’s experience, his mother’s persistence in the value of education was so deeply instilled in him that he recalled, “I felt it was something I had to do. So even though I had an opportunity to make money right then I still stayed in school and graduated. I even got accepted into Adelphi University. I chose to go into music.” For Chuck D however, the verbal

expressions of education's importance was not enough, as he found himself struggling in his first year of college, it was a different form of parental influence that inspired him to persevere. "Your parents have to be a factor, not for them to tell you what to do, but how you let them down. Seriously, I got kicked out of college my first year...I felt bad, I felt that I let myself down and I let my people down." Those feelings of parental disappointment were enough to inspire Chuck to return to school and make the sacrifice necessary to regain admittance and ultimately graduate. "I sat in classes from September 1979, and I was reinstated in Spring 1981. I sat in a year and a half of classes for free." Clearly unhappy about having to repeat over one year's worth of school work, the disappointment that he felt of letting his parents down in their expectation that he would graduate from college was enough to inspire Chuck to go back to school to complete his degree. The comments by both Big Daddy Kane and Chuck D challenges myths of African-American parents not caring about their children's education and are consistent with research that shows that parental expectations can generally help to explain children's high educational achievements and success (Catsambis, 1998; Goyette & Xie, 1999).

Cultural/Community Influence

Six of the ten (60%) participants reported that the larger community and youth culture at the time was influential in their beliefs about the importance of school and education. Once again, the way in which the message that school and education was important came across in various forms. The pervasive feeling that being smart was a good thing was enough to influence some, while others enjoyed the competitive aspect of outperforming friends and colleagues. DMC excitedly recalled, "When we would take a test it would always be, 'Let me see what you got! Let me see what you got!' Even if it was the bullies and the trouble making kids, you couldn't get lower than a C, because that wasn't cool." This comment by DMC corroborates the

ideas of some researchers who believe that African American males hold attitudes toward school that are at least as positive as those found in other students from other racial groups (Ainsworth-Darnell & Downey, 1998; Mickelson, 1990). DLB was able to point to a few specific older colleagues/community members that he looked up to that helped shape his beliefs, “I was always about doing my thing and being focused on what I’m supposed to do at school. It was however some of my friends growing up...Nathaniel Robinson, Michael Williams, and Mohandas Dewes, known as Kool Moe Dee, they were like older brothers to me, and they went to college while I was still busy being DLB of the Fearless Four...I just fell in love with the college atmosphere...these were the guys that made me think of college in the first place.” DLB’s crediting his desire to obtain a college education on the models and examples set by his peers from a similar background confirms the position of several researchers about the importance of models in academic success, (Bandura, 1986; Schunk, 1987; Schunk, 2003), and simultaneously disconfirms some of the negative stereotypes about Hip-Hop artists and Black males often reported in mainstream media.

During the late 70’s and 80’s when many of the participants in this study were pre-teens or teenagers, there was another sub-cultural movement whose popularity was growing simultaneously with the growth of Hip-Hop. The movement was known as the Nation of God’s and Earths, or the Five Percenters (Dass, 2006). As an offshoot of the Nation of Islam, the Nation of Gods and Earths doctrine asserts that Black people are the original people of the planet Earth, and that they are the fathers and mothers of civilization. There were several early Hip-Hop artists who were members of, or who were strongly influenced by this youth led, quasi-religious, Black Nationalist movement. Sadat X, prior to becoming one of the members of Brand Nubian was one of them. He shares the influence that the organization had on his beliefs about school

and learning, “When I was growing up what really stressed the schooling and the learning for me was the Nation of the God’s and Earth’s. When I was about 17 coming into the light of that. They would actually tell me, ‘Yo, you know something, the Black man is God!’...the Gods I came up with, we were taught that you have to do the knowledge to everything. If you’re going to do the knowledge to everything, that’s 360 degrees. So if you’re gonna know these God degree lessons, you need to know those school lessons also. So we went to school and mastered that also.” While Sadat X was the only interviewee who claimed membership in any Black Nationalist group, the influence of the pervasive belief system during the developmental years of many of those interviewed may have been an influence in the above average high school graduation rates of my study group, and could be an area for further study. While this study, in later sections identifies the larger community and cultural influences as a major problem area affecting Black males and their desire to achieve academically, the findings in this section shows that there are in fact elements of urban culture that have had and can potentially continue to have a positive influence on the educational aspirations of urban, male youth. A study by A.A. Akom (2003) documented the positive influence Black nationalist, Black achievement ideology had on young African American women and their ability to embrace traditional values such as hard work, sacrifice and academic achievement, while embracing their own separate racial and cultural identities, (Akom, 2003). Perhaps more emphasis and attention needs to be paid to the positive examples and models that do exist in the urban community that could serve as positive role models for Black males as a counterbalance to the proliferation of negative examples that are frequently discussed, both within and outside of Hip-Hop.

Experiences

The second phase of my first research question seeks to determine what experiences the study participants had while in school. The significant findings were that the overwhelming majority of participants excelled in school, and they also responded best to environments in which high expectations and strictness were employed.

Excelled in School

Considering the time lapse between their elementary school years and the interviews, I was surprised to find several participants who were able to recall their elementary reading levels and grades. DLB recalled, “I was always in the top percentile of the class. I was reading at an 8th grade level by the time I was in the 4th grade.” Kurtis Blow also recalled, “I graduated from public school with honors...in the 4th grade I had a 10th grade reading and comprehension level and I got into these special classes called I.G.C. (Intellectually Gifted Children).”

While 90% (9 out of 10) of the participants expressed that they excelled in school, there were a few comments that qualified their experiences despite receiving good grades. Kool Moe Dee shared that while there was an appreciation for the wealth of information available to him in school, he was disillusioned by the perceived “cap on the information you could get.” Kool Moe Dee’s expression about a ‘cap’ on the attainable information provided in the school system, coincides with the position of resistance theorists who believe that over time students, predominately those who attend underperforming schools, eventually view schools as tools in the “reproduction of inequality” instead of places where “education is seen as a practice of freedom, a place to build critical consciousness...” (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002).

A separate experience shared by Sadat X was that despite doing well academically he questioned his class programming. “I always did well in school. I was always able to pass the

courses and always got pretty good grades. I was never a student that was learning deficient. I always got pretty good grades. My thing with school was that they would always put me in classes...the behavioral classes. A couple of times I was in classes where there was just like six people in the class.” Although Sadat X was the only one of the participants to have this experience, unfortunately his experience is one that is too frequently shared by other African American males in the public school system, sometimes at very young ages, despite their proven ability to perform academically. However, due to non-academic factors, the types of labeling and sorting experienced by Sadat X impacts the educational opportunities for a disproportionate number of African American males who are inappropriately placed in behavioral or special education classes, negatively affecting their experiences with school (Harry & Anderson, 1994; Noguera, 2003).

Competitive

Academic competitiveness was a strategy used by several participants (3 out of 10) to outperform their friends and colleagues in school. It would make sense that many of these same individuals, who would later be inspired to greatness in their profession as rap artists and the fierce competition which exists in the genre, to have been similarly influenced in their academic endeavors. Kurtis Blow explains, “I made it up in my mind to do well in school and it was a competitive thing. I loved getting 100’s on tests, I loved doing well, and all the accolades that come from that. So I gave myself at an early age self motivation to stay in school, but not to just stay in school but to do well in school. It was the competition that drove me. I wanted to be the best!” This competitive view of wanting to be the best, which was also repeated by DMC and Big Daddy Kane, contradicts aspects of the Oppositional Cultural theory assertion by researchers like John Ogbu (Ogbu, 1978), and supports the view that at least in some cases, African

American students hold attitudes toward school and achievement that are at least as positive as other racial groups (Ainsworth-Darnell & Downey, 1998; Mickelson, 1990).

High Expectations/Strictness

In what seemed to be counterintuitive, the majority of participants, (7 out of 10), expressed the sentiment that they preferred and excelled with teachers that were strict on them, and in general talked about those educators with a sense of respect and endearment. Jalil shared a story in which he considered requesting a change from a high school English teacher with a reputation for working her students very hard, and after sitting in one of her classes for a brief time he clearly understood where her reputation came from. However, he listened to her opening day speech about her expectations for her students and decided to give her a chance. In retrospect he shared, “I learned to love the hard teacher. When you’re young you try to stay away from the strict teacher...The hard teachers are the best teachers in the world. The ones that look at your papers and squeeze the life out of you, those are the best teachers in the world. They’re not easily satisfied. They want more from you...They care and they know better, and they stand behind their work. They want to produce quality students as opposed to looking at how many students get out of here.”

A few participants expressed admiration for teachers that directly challenged them and their capabilities. Touching on the competitive nature found in many Hip-Hop artists, the direct challenge, and in some cases threats by ‘caring’ teachers who refused to lower their standards and expectations helped several participants rise to the occasion and meet the high bar that was set. Chuck D shares a story of one such incident. He recalls a teacher that was bold enough to, “look me square in the face and say, ‘Yo son, you’re not going to make it here.’ That was a good challenge because I had to prove in my head that I was going to bust ‘em in the ass...his name

was Dr. Hunter, and he was a hard motherfucker, and he needed to be.” In most instances the participants shared that the strict nature of these teachers was acceptable because at the core of the strictness and toughness was a perceived sense that the teacher genuinely cared. These comments by Jalil and Chuck D confirm the effectiveness of what has been termed “culturally relevant” teaching (Ladson-Billings, 1995) or “emancipatory pedagogies” (Foster, 1993) by educational researchers, where teachers believe in and are committed to extracting the excellence that they know lies, sometimes dormant, within their students. Most of the participants that responded well to this form of teaching, reminisced about their strict teachers approach in a familial (motherly/fatherly) way, and seemed to appreciate the discipline and strictness as generating from a deep sense of caring and concern for their future well being.

Self Discipline

The development of a sense of self-discipline in order to progress through the educational system, credited by some participants as a result of their personal focus and clarity of purpose was another experience shared by three out of ten participants. An example would be that of Big Daddy Kane who expressed, “I knew what I had to do and I was determined to finish.”

On the contrary, the importance of developing a sense of self-discipline for others was a result of taking a realistic inventory of the opportunities and future offered by life in the hood. In a statement that could be considered a lesson learned by one of the high school dropouts included in this study, his advice to young African-American males struggling with school is enlightening. “Do you want to be what your parents are? If not, you have to find a way to motivate yourself to go get it. Somebody has to be the intelligent parent in your household. If your mother and father ain’t that, then guess who has to do it? You! You have to do it for yourself. Don’t sit around and wait for somebody to give you something.” So while the speaker of those words did not in fact

follow his own example to graduate from school, the lesson that he shares from his own experience of not graduating highlights the importance of developing a sense of self-discipline in order to escape the ‘cycle of poverty’ discussed by social reproduction theorists (Bowles & Gintis, 2002).

Double-Consciousness

The concept of ‘double-consciousness,’ which has been discussed in African-American literature as far back as the early 1900’s by the African-American scholar and sociologist W.E.B. Du Bois was also a theme reiterated by several participants. In his seminal work, *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois (1903) describes a world in which Black Americans were forced to see themselves through the eyes of others. “One ever feels his twoness, an American, a Negro; two warring souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder (Du Bois, 1903, p. 45).”

While the double-consciousness examples expressed by the participants in this study were not along racial lines as those described by DuBois, participants still found themselves engaged in choices between two conflicting possible selves. Both inside and outside of school, participants expressed a keen sense of having to create a double-consciousness either on the streets or in the academic setting. On the streets it was matter of choosing which set of friends to hang with, and in the classroom it was a matter of choosing which personality would be on display. LA Sunshine, who had two sets of friends in his neighborhood, explained it in this way. “In the neighborhood we grew up in, ‘The Wild Wild West’ that neighborhood was kind of divided in half, Kool Moe Dee and that clique who were perceived as ‘nerds’ or school guys and they were smart, and the other cats was my street crew, cats that grew up under Nicky Barnes’ entourage and those kinds of cats. They aspired to be the next drug dealers, and my brother was

part of that circle. So I was kind of just in there by default, but the person that I was, leaned more towards the nerdy cats that wasn't involved in none of that street activity. ” Several other participants share similar experiences of their parents monitoring who they would be allowed to socialize with. The difficulty, as described by Kool Moe Dee, was to successfully navigate between the two counter cultural existences. “So I had to come up with the savvy and moxie to be able to be cool enough to get to school. The first thing in ghetto ego is about respect, so the first thing I do when I'm headed to school and I see Rowlo and them across the street, I know they're selling drugs now...so I just go over and give them love, give them respect, because there's ego there. What you're doing is creating rapport with the neighborhood thug so that you can do what you have to do without worrying about them messing with you or offending them in a way where they'll want to bother you...What I had to do is I had to figure out a way to be cool enough with them, but at arm's distance enough with them for them to know. Kind of like the pass that they give the basketball player...That was like a hood code. Hip-Hop didn't have the same kind of love yet, but it ultimately got there, so the main thing in that sense was to be able to be savvy enough to figure out how do I make this cool. I'd walk out every morning, I'd see little drug dealers, ‘Hey man what's up?’ I'd walk over across the street give them a pound [hand clap] and give them their five minutes. ‘What's going on man?’ ‘Just out here grinding, trying to hustle, trying to make a dollar.’ ‘Word.’ ‘What's going on with you?’ ‘Ahhh...gotta get to the damn train and get downtown...’ I have to act like I'm commiserating about going to school so that they'll feel comfortable. Cause if you put their shit down, then it turns into that dumb crab in the barrel kind of thing like, like who do you think you are? So part of the ghetto thing that gave me the sense of superiority is I really felt like I was ahead of the curve on the thugs and I was ahead of the curve on the nerds. Cause the nerds didn't know how to relate to the thug, and the

thug damn sure didn't have respect for the nerd. So I had to create this middle zone where everybody's comfortable, and that's an art that a lot of people don't master." What Kool Moe Dee is expressing here are the realities that young males, particularly in urban environments, often have to deal with daily, all before reaching the school doors. Successfully negotiating with neighborhood peers about going to school, and continuing to speak, dress, and act in a way that doesn't alienate them from their neighborhood colleagues is often a very tumultuous, yet necessary reality. It is these types of realities that often times educators who may not understand the realities of growing up in certain neighborhoods are oblivious to, and therefore judge and criticize young African American males for behaviors that they simply do not understand. However in the eyes of many urban youth, their decisions about whether or not to attend school can be a matter of survival. These stories, examples of the The Multiple Worlds model has important implications for schools and learning, because it forces educators to view their students and their daily realities in a contextual, more holistic way. Further, the model suggests a focus for educators "...to identify institutional structures that operate to facilitate boundary crossing strategies and that do not require students to give up or hide important features of their lives" (Phelan, Davidson & Cao, 1991).

The sense of duality, expressed by several participants from the street level, was shared by only one participant's classroom experience. Double consciousness was clearly evident as Chuck D described his transition from a predominately Black high school to a specialized, highly selective, predominately white one. "I had some skills but I also had to challenge myself. I knew I just couldn't be myself and just be my extroverted self and do well so I had to figure out...I used to take long walks with myself in 9th grade to try to figure out what kind of person do I have to be in order to get by...At home I was always Chuck. In school I was Carlton. So I always

lived two lives.” When Chuck acted like Chuck at his new school, “I was entertaining and fucking up every class. I had to become Carlton real quick...Chuck was not making it there.”

The concept of double-lives or double-consciousness is still a prevalent one, and is an important component of discussions about achievement motivation and racial identity. The sentiments expressed by the participants in this section raises the issue that before even reaching the classroom, for some African American males the mere act of going to school is a rejection of the ‘ghetto culture’ from which they come (Macleod, 1987).

Questioning/Challenging Information

Learning to be a critical thinker, able to question and challenge information is a valuable skill. While a majority of the participants criticized the educational curriculum for its lack of relevance and diversity, as I will discuss later in this chapter, only three of the ten share experiences where they challenged the teachers and the perceived curricular bias they were experiencing at the time.

All three of the participants who did challenge the curriculum, did so in the areas of social science and English, the liberal arts, where the perceived need to challenge was most acute, while math and science were spared because of their perceived objectivity. Kool Moe Dee explains, “I always loved science and math because there was a formula that could get you to a conclusive answer. English and history in particular, were extremely subjective.”

Again, while only a few respondents verbalize the experience of actually challenging the information, there is potentially a lot more silent resistance taking place that needs to be analyzed. Chuck D expresses the view that it was because of his participation in a Black Nationalist summer program as a young boy, which he credits with helping to shape his consciousness, that lead to his and his peers challenging of the historical information they were

being taught. The more the respondents seemed to know about history and the counter stories of the historical past, the more likely they seem to have been to either challenge the information, or struggle in the classes where the information was being taught. Chuck expresses his experiences in classes after his participation in the empowering summer program in which he, and several other members who were to become part of the group Public Enemy, participated. “When we went in 1970 it was powerful because we were going back to school after that summer challenging teachers. Like, ‘Naw, we really can’t buy that Columbus story.’ Or, ‘Abraham Lincoln didn’t really free the slaves.’” Kool Moe Dee takes the argument further by expressing the difficulty many African American males experience submitting to biased historical information and attempts to assimilate them into a particular worldview. In Kool Moe Dee’s personal example, his constant critiques eventually led to declining grades and the perception of him having a bad attitude, but it was spawned by his willingness to question the things that he was being taught. “I figured this out by the 6th grade...you’re being graded based on your memory as opposed to your knowledge. And your memory has more to do with programming than it does actual teaching...So in many ways we’re being attacked for not assimilating, and the guys that assimilated better did better...Part of your job is to be tenacious enough to understand this is the objective, whether it’s overt, covert, or inadvertent, one of the ways it’s still what it is. The system is designed to assimilate you, and the hardest thing for African American men to do, especially, is to assimilate into a system that throughout history we’ve been told, shown, reinforced, heard, word-of-mouth, that this system doesn’t have your back. So you’re telling me to assimilate into a system that throughout history and in my fabric I feel doesn’t have my back.” These experiences and sentiments, while only expressed by a few participants, may provide further insight into the different form of youth resistance exemplified by some African American

males that negatively impact academic achievement. Without clear evidence that African American students are more resistant to school than other ethnic and racial groups, it would be useful to look at the forms of resistance displayed by African American male students to see whether their forms of resistance fall more frequently in the category of ‘self-defeating’ resistance (Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001), which is said to contain an element of critique of the system and no element of social justice, and which ultimately ends up in students underperforming in school and too frequently dropping out. In this model conformist resistance seems to relate better with academic success.

Lack of Support

The last subtheme in the area of experiences with the educational system was also shared by three of the ten participants. Interestingly, two of the three who experienced what they perceived was a lack of support in their educational lives, also eventually dropped out of school. While one of the participants who eventually dropped out expressed that personal issues and a general lack of interest caused him to stop going to school, he did not discuss any efforts by school support staff to help him to deal with his personal issues. On the other hand, Paradise, who describes himself as an excellent student up until high school, but because of what he believes was a large discrepancy in the quality of education he received in his Bronx neighborhood school, compared to the educational rigor at the specialized magnet high school he was accepted to and attended, and the resulting lack of systemic educational support, led to his eventual dropping out. Paradise explains, “my grades were the third best in my school in junior high, but when I got to Brooklyn Tech they were doing mathematics that I never even heard of. When I started the school I was two years behind the other students in the school. What they did was they put...they don’t teach you, they don’t teach you to catch you up, they teach under the

assumption that you have the knowledge of some things already, and if you're not up to speed then it's your problem...they didn't have a real system, they just put us in these so-called special classes, which were 60% black, even when black students were only like 5% of the students in Brooklyn Tech...So I just stopped going to school and started doing my Hip-Hop." Paradise is a clear example of an African American student with great academic potential, but because of what he perceived as a lack of systemic support from the administration and staff, decided not to complete his high school education (Fine, 1991; Dei, Mazzuca, McIsaac, & Zine, 1997).

Perceptions

The third phase of my first research question seeks to examine the way Hip-Hop participants in this study regard, understand, or interpret schools and the educational institution and its potential for African American males.

Systemic Plan

While not discussed to any major degree by the majority of the participants, the three participants who did express thoughts about their perceptions of the educational system, despite their previously stated beliefs about the importance of obtaining an education, shared perceptions about the educational system that were much less positive. In fact, two of the three being college graduates, their responses to the questions about their perceptions of the school system generated some of the most passionate responses of any recorded.

In discussing the general level of struggles for African American males in the American educational system at all levels, Chuck D became angry as he expressed his thoughts. "This ain't the kids fault. It's systematic. This is a systematic decimation genocidal mission to eliminate the intelligence and the fullness of a people...they don't want 75% of Black boys to be brilliant. They want 75% of black boys to fill prison beds for an industry making 500% on the dollar for

somebody that doesn't consider themselves family, our family." The second participant, who did not become as emotional, turned his perspective about the systemic, diabolic plan to suppress Black male intelligence around, and used his words as a source of inspiration for young Black males currently in the system, and considering dropping out or giving up. "You're not quitting on them, and that's the connection we haven't really, really made. That's the message that hasn't really been reinforced. That quitting is quitting on yourself, you're not quitting on the system, because the system goes on without you anyway, and quite frankly in many ways the system doesn't want you in it, flourishing at least. And you will be in the system, but just on the other side...to the jail side of the equation, because they're building jails for those guys that make those missteps." The two responses point to a clear belief that many of the problems faced by African American males in the educational system are not entirely the fault of the students, but that there are systemic, social structural conditions at work which contribute to the problems, a key component of what scholars term 'resistance theory' (Giroux, 1983; Solorzano, 1998; Solorzano & Delgado-Bernal, 2001; Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2002).

In summarizing the first section and the responses to the first research question it is interesting that despite overall positive beliefs about school and its importance, and relatively positive personal experiences with the school system for individual participants, the vocalized view about the overall perception of the public school system expressed was one of suspicion and skepticism. I would add that there was a general undercurrent, though not discussed in much detail, of distrust about the plans and intentions of the educational system, namely the way it serves as a tool, either overtly or covertly, in reproducing social and economic inequalities (Bowles & Gintis, 2002). Despite this perception the majority of the participants took a pragmatic approach and found ways to navigate the system successfully.

In the next section I will discuss the findings related to the second research question; in what ways, if any, do Hip-Hop artists **critique** the educational system and offer **ideas for its transformation**? The challenge in organizing the findings in this section was that in several instances a topic discussed by one participant as a criticism, was simultaneously another participants' idea for transformation, and conversely, a concept presented as an idea for transformation, was presented by another participant as an area for criticism. Where appropriate I combine topics where transformative ideas and criticisms about the same subject are shared, and present both perspectives on the subject, while in other instances they remain separate.

Critique

Cultural/Community

The most significant criticism of the educational system, in which all 10 of the 10 participants (100%) agreed had no direct connection to the school system itself, instead the overwhelming area of criticism was the perceived negative influence of the larger community and cultural impact on African American male youth's aspirations of obtaining an education.

The strongest criticism was held for the influence of popular culture as a distracter for young people of all races, but particularly African American males, from their focus on obtaining an education. Whether it was because of the materialism the participants felt is so pervasive in contemporary programming of television and music, to the influence of street culture and the proliferation of guns in the hands of young people in urban communities, the undesirable effect has been a disinterest in educational pursuits, and an increased level of interest in the pursuit of fast money.

In what Kool Moe Dee calls the 'Ghetto Mind Trick,' he describes a contemporary youth culture that dictates that one must look a certain way or have a certain stature in order to go to

school. One example shared by DLB, who currently serves as an educator in a large southern school district, explained his agreement with KMD's analysis in this way. "It's hard to say to a young Black male, 'Look man, walk the way that I'm walking, and you'll be alright.' When they can see that J. Bo's car has more bling than Mr. Barksdale's car. J. Bo has spinners, he has 20's [inch rims], he has switches, and you're driving a Ford. Hip-Hop culture strikes again. Rap culture strikes again." DMC adds to the sentiment by painting the picture of youth desirous of material possessions, yet pursuing them by what he describes as the 'easy way out.' "Our generation right now we're in a world of fast money, fast cars, fast women, it's not about the struggle, it's about taking the easy way out. So education to these kids is not the easy way out. The easy way out is rapping, basketball, selling drugs or being famous."

There was an equally strong expression of disgust at the glorification of material possessions in popular culture, while simultaneously silencing and downplaying intelligence in the Black community. Chuck D explains that one way that silencing intelligence has been accomplished is with the proliferation of guns in the hands of uneducated youth. "How do you get around gun culture being in the hands of an idiot? That made a lot of people who were intelligent and could back it up, like you're not going to clown me, it made intelligence silent again. It's been a 30 to 35 year pattern where intelligence has been silenced by the threat of gun culture and crime in the Black community. So you don't see people in the Black community brag about their minds, they brag about possessions. Meaning that the smartest kid in the class now doesn't want to raise their hand because they don't want to look like they're showing off...So you can show off your possessions and your consumption, but you can't show off your mind because people will say, 'Sit your ass down you think you're better than me.'" The preceding quote by Chuck D is an example of one aspect of John Ogbu's Oppositional Culture Model

(Ogbu, 1978) taken to the extreme. In Ogbu's model, one hypothesis is that high achieving 'involuntary' minority students experience negative peer pressure by their intra-group peers due to academic achievement. The theoretical model distinguishes between voluntary and involuntary minorities. African American students would fit into the 'involuntary' minority category because they have become members of American society through enslavement. In Chuck's recollection, the potential negative consequences of high academic achievement can be far worse than simply negative peer pressure, but could actually result in threats of, or actual physical violence. Recalling a time where guns were not as prevalent in urban communities, intelligent Black individuals were not as tentative to display their smarts, because the negative peer pressure or threats of violence were less frightening.

Even when the threat level doesn't reach the point of gunplay, other participants shared that being studious and achieving academically in today's culture can be a physically dangerous proposition. Although none of the participants complained about being physically attacked or threatened, several expressed the view that today's youth have pressures on them to submit to the new standards of coolness expressed in contemporary culture, or be teased and bullied by peers. Paradise expressed the dynamic in this way "...If you act too intelligent as a young Black male, the other Black males will bully you and tease you about acting white. It's so horrible that even trying to be educated and trying to do well in school and they'll question you, 'Why you acting white?' If you're reading a book there's something wrong with that. There's something wrong with you if you're a black male and you're trying to be intelligent and business-minded...Everybody wants you to be thuggish, and ignorant, and sag your pants, and act stupid, and that's cool. When I was growing up, it wasn't cool to be stupid." While Ogbu's theory has its detractors, Paradise confirms that at least in some cases, as Ogbu's theory suggests, Black

students do not aspire to get good grades or be seen performing overtly academic activities because their peers will perceive that as ‘acting white.’

As I mentioned earlier, this criticism, that the larger cultural community has an overall negative effect on the educational pursuits and efforts of African American males, was recorded by all of the participants in the study. The remaining criticisms however, were all directed at specific elements of the school system and structure.

Relationships

The most significant finding critical of the educational system was the need to develop more authentic, caring relationships between teachers and students. Eight of the ten participants (80%) shared the critique that there is a pervasive disconnect between many African American male students and the teachers responsible to teach them. While one participant expressed an extreme view on the lack of viable relationships between African American students and their non African American teachers in this way, “The worse thing we ever did as an African-American community is allow those who hate us to teach our children,” the majority of the respondents agreed that the ability to sense or know if a teacher is genuinely interested or cares about a child’s well being and future, is enough to turn a student off from putting in the necessary effort to succeed, or in some cases turn off entirely to the system and what it offers. The results, all too frequently, are African American youth who eventually give up on their educational pursuits. LA Sunshine explains the dynamic in this way, “If you’re in school and nobody is doing anything for you, cats are just going through the motions punching a clock and they’re not really trying to teach you nothing, that’s how you’re going to feel, that’s how you throw your hands up relatively quickly and easily regardless to what age or stage you’re at.” Some participants expressed the view that teachers were only responsive to the students that

were responsive to them, and students with attention or behavioral issues are essentially disregarded. Frequently, it appears that the high energy and mannerisms of some African American male youth are perceived by teachers, lacking a connection to the culture, as ‘thuggish’ or ‘criminal’ behavior, and thus efforts to reach the students in authentic ways are not pursued, and erroneous reports of student misbehavior abound (Dee, 2005; Downey & Pribesh, 2004).

Unfortunately, the lack of connection, understanding and interest between teachers and students results in students shutting down even more. Kool Moe Dee explained the relationship in these terms, “The sense in the school is you don’t care. You’re just here, you’re getting your check, and you’re getting on the bus and going back to Long Island. You don’t care, so I don’t care about you. The ghetto moxie is I don’t care about you either. The way you reverse that is if you show sincere concern.” The participants’ views on this issue transcended the level of interest shown by teachers in the classrooms, but the participants remarked about the level of caring that extend to students beyond when the final bell rings.

Kool Moe Dee illustrates this sentiment by recalling a conversation with a high school teacher who remarked about KMD’s repeated lateness to his class. “You don’t even know what it takes for me to get here every morning. That’s weathering the alcoholism in my family, whether I can actually get some sleep because of my mother and father fighting, getting up with no sleep, no food in the house so I’m starving, gotta get outside rushing because I’m late, give Rowlo his five minutes, make sure I’m cool with him to go get on the train to get to school. I had to navigate through all of that just to get here. So...you can’t just typecast me or stereotype me based on your lack of connection to my experience.”

The issue of relationships was also a popular theme with regard to transformation of the educational system. Respect and fairness were regarded as important initial steps in creating stronger positive relationships between educators and African American males. In describing an example of how his teachers showed the proper level of respect and thereby created a positive environment for students DMC shares, “They never disrespected a student in front of everybody. They never made a student feel below the others, never called them out. Even with me when I was messing up a little bit in the 6th grade they waited and said, ‘Can I speak to you a minute?’ They didn’t come at me like, ‘You must do this...’ they were like, ‘You can do this D, and if you need help that’s what I’m here for.’ They would never put a student on the spot, and they never gave up on us.” The critical first step of respect, in the view of several participants, allows for and opens students up to being taught. On the contrary, several participants expressed the view that without the requisite levels of respect and caring, it is increasingly difficult for some African American male students to buy in to the educational process. On this subject Kool Moe Dee expresses his view, “It’s hard to take information from people that you don’t see having an interest in you. That’s the key that I think...don’t underestimate kids feeling your interest or lack thereof. They can tell who really cares.”

The potential benefits of maintaining positive, respectful relationships with the students can also have an additional benefit explains Sadat X. For those teachers and schools struggling with discipline and behavioral issues, an improved personal relationship could help teachers maintain better classroom management with some of the more difficult, disruptive students. As a former self described ‘behavioral problem’ himself while in public school, who later worked in the classroom as a teacher’s aide, he explains, “Believe me, once you take an interest in them kids, and you get to know them personally, nine times out of ten he’ll calm down. There would

be times in my classroom where Ravon was over here doing this and that, but I would tell Ravon, ‘Look, you bugging out right now. You know you bugging out, you know I know your father, you know I went to school with your father, if you need some time...’ ‘Am I bugging out?’ ‘Yeah you are bugging out. Just cool out for a little while, let’s get this work done.’ A lot of the kids just want you to have an interest in them.”

Respect, relationships and ‘authentic caring,’ which derives from relationships where “learning is premised on relation with teachers and other school adults having as their chief concern the students’ entire well being” (Valenzuela, 1999), was a major critique and simultaneously an idea for transformation shared by the majority of participants in the study.

Along with stronger relationships between educators and students, another relationship-oriented theme was for the schools to develop stronger connections and relationships with members of the communities within which they exist. The expressed belief is that if schools hired teachers and personnel from the community where they are located, those individuals will have a better understanding of the needs and connection with the people within that community. Instead of having teachers traveling, sometimes long distances, to serve in schools far from their community, an alternative approach, similar to ‘community policing’ would be ‘community schooling,’ where the two are more closely aligned. Kool Moe Dee envisions schools where, “We have to stop looking at it like it’s separate...I would at least try to have the Principal, Assistant Principal, somebody from that area working here, somebody that lived in that area working here. Or at a certain level, have some of the teachers...like we used to do field trips—the field trip has to be the hood.”

In one of the most memorable stories gathered during the data-gathering phase, comes a personal account from DLB, which directly addresses the importance of building stronger

community relationships. After his recording career, DLB joined the ranks of educators, and eventually became an Assistant Principal at the same school that he attended as a junior high school student. One day while walking through the cafeteria, a group of African American males students were banging on the cafeteria tables and taking turns rhyming. To the students at the time, DLB was Mr. Barksdale, the Assistant Principal, and they assumed, as most young students probably would, that the AP was going to ask them to stop making noise. Unbeknownst to them, Mr. Barksdale was not their typical educational administrator. As DLB walked up to the crowd of youths, they stopped performing, “No, don’t stop, keep going. ‘For real?’ ‘Yeah for real. Go ahead. I want to hear something. I wanna hear which one of y’all got a little something. And then I’ll let you hear a little something from me. Who wanna battle?’ They went right back to it and started beating and spitting their verses, and when they got to the part where they would curse, because I was standing there they would bleep it out. I was like, ‘Alright, I see where you need to go.’ We went through a whole thing where I was telling them how they didn’t need profanity to make their things effective. Then I also asked them if they knew who I was and they all said, ‘No.’ So I spit a verse for them...at the end of my verse, I carried them over to a section of the school where one of my original tags [graffiti piece] was still up on the wall. They were like, ‘What’s that?’ I was like, ‘That was me’...now go home and tell your parents you met DLB today, and that DLB is your Assistant Principal, and see what your parents say to you at home, and come back tomorrow morning and let me know what they say.’ The majority of them, when they came back the next day, some of them said I was ‘Uncle Darryl,’ their parents said that I was like a brother to them coming up, everybody had information to give back that day because they had gone home and told their parents that they met DLB, and never knew who DLB was until their parents broke it down for them...So we had that relationship, but also the relevance

because here they are doing their thing and they thought there was no one there who thought that what they were doing was relevant. And then came me. It was definitely relevant for me, and I let them know that what they were feeling is relevant to me, and part of who I am today.”

While not every educator can relate in the same dynamic way as the story above shows, the larger idea of employing school staff members, including teachers and administrators, who come from the same community where the school is located, or come from similar backgrounds and neighborhoods, so that the students can feel like they are respected, understood and appreciated for their experiences and what they value can potentially go a long way in improving relations within school sites (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Black Male Teachers

Under the larger theme of relationships three of the ten respondents brought up the severe absence of Black teachers, especially Black males, in the educational pipeline (Irvine, 1989). The interesting caveat is that the participants who addressed this issue did not simply focus on the need for more Black male educators, but specifically commented on the numbers of potential Black male educators who could have a positive impact on Black male youth, but because of prior criminal convictions are not considered. Sadat X shared his personal dilemma regarding this matter. “We need to have more passionate teachers for our community. I used to teach in the school system, and then I got arrested and I went to jail. Now I’m no longer able to teach in the school system anymore. A lot of the brothers that have been incarcerated, that have come home and learned, and got their degrees those are some of the best teachers, especially for young males, because they’ve already been in that position. They can say, ‘Listen, I’ve been to jail, I know what it’s like. That’s where you’re headed and you’re not going to like that.’ I changed up and went to school, and got my education and now I’m here to teach you.” Following similar

reasoning Chuck D agrees that utilizing African American males who have been incarcerated would improve relationships and are an untapped, overlooked resource in providing the needed guidance for many African American males struggling within the educational system. Chuck opines, “The fact that they’re not in the educational system is a crime to young black males, because there’s no second chance for them in society, and there’s no second chance for them to teach.” In Chuck’s view, not only would the inclusion of older African American males who have had the experience of being incarcerated benefit young African American males, by taking the glamour off of the street life and the easy road to making money, but it would also provide a second opportunity for the rehabilitated educators to teach what they’ve learned. Chuck continues, “I would be sending every single 5th grade boy to jail camp for two weeks. 8th grade I’ll send them for 3 weeks, and I don’t care what they do with the other part of the twelve years. You can send them for two weeks to prison camp, the good ones too. Mandatory. Guarantee you, you’d be seeing an incredible amount of valedictorians. The glow of jail would be off.” The participants in this study confirm what researchers have hypothesized, which is that Black male educators are able to bring to the classroom cultural pedagogical approaches that are compatible with the learning styles and needs of minority students, particularly African American boys (Irvine, 1989).

Curriculum Relevance/Differentiation

Whether educators are Black males or females, with or without a prior criminal record, seven out of ten participants criticized what they perceived as a lack of cultural relevance in the curriculum, and the use of antiquated pedagogical methods for instruction (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2005).

The relevance of the public school curriculum to the lives of African American males was another topic that was an area of critique as well as an option for transforming schools.

One common critique that seven out of the ten (70%) participants felt was that they were being taught in “Eurocentric, and culturally insensitive ways.” One participant added, “by teachers who don’t care a damn about us in general.” Paradise in his critique of the educational curriculum, and why it’s not interesting to many African American males, shares a story that he had recently heard while attending a speech event, the content of which he obviously agreed with. Paradise repeats what he heard, “If he were to stand and take a picture of everybody in the room and give everybody a copy of that photo what would be the first thing you do when you get the photo? Look for yourself in that photo, to see where you were. And if you couldn’t find yourself in that photo of a thousand people you would become disinterested in it after that.” The lack of inclusion in the educational curriculum, especially in English and Social Science classrooms, following the analogy presented by Paradise, has African American youth lacking interest in the material being taught in America’s classrooms.

DLB, who is an experienced educator, and former administrator, uses educational terminology to describe his assessment of the problem. Referring to the 3R’s frequently discussed in educational discussions, referring to rigor, relevance, and relationships, DLB asserts that the educational system has forgotten the relevance factor. “The system says to our children, ‘Leap over here first, and then discover what you can learn.’ We shouldn’t have to leap over any boundaries to get our education. Our education should be designed for us...” Recalling a required reading text from his educational past, DLB continues to make his point through a personal example, “I remember being in a school where one of the books that was a must read was ‘Shiloh.’ Shiloh’s about a little white boy with a golden retriever dog...I think it was a

golden retriever...If you want to attract the imagination or engage the learning of a young black male, you're going to have to talk to him about something other than a little white boy that lives up in the mountains...with his beautiful, golden hair flowing, Retriever. It's just not real. We see Pit Bulls. We see Rocs, we see chocolate Labs. I'm not saying we're totally clued out to any other dog, and that there's a 'ghetto caliber' dog, that's not what I'm saying, but I don't know any Black people who have full breed dogs. We usually end up with mutts, with mixed breeds, but if you want to say to us have heroes that look like us...then at the same time, have stories that reflect our life. Just give us something that we can look at and say, 'Yeah I see myself in that situation.'”

Aside from the lack of relevance discussed by participants, another aspect of the problem discussed centered on the methods used to teach kids in the 21st century, via methods from long gone eras. DMC expressed, “I couldn't teach the kids the way I was being taught in the 70's. I would have to update it...I would make the information available to them more exciting and appealing.” With practical experience and information on the topic of alternative pedagogical methods, Sadat X shared a personal experience where he witnessed unconventional methods of teaching complex material being successful with urban youth. “I worked in a program where we taught the kids how to take the SAT's and stuff like that through rap. It was a program that was done by Rosie Perez where we actually, me, Dres³, Talib⁴, we actually took the subject matter and made it into a rap, and made it easier for those kids to learn.” The importance of curricular relevance, and utilization of pedagogical approaches that are inclusive of the urban culture of the students lives is critical and has been shown to have a significant impact on the levels of success

³ Dres was a member of a rap group out of Queens, New York formed in 1989 named Black Sheep.

⁴ Talib Kweli, born in Brooklyn, New York formed the rap duo Black Star along with actor and MC Mos Def.

African American students experience (Ladson-Billings, 1995, Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2005; Alim, 2007).

A more relevant curriculum and more engaging pedagogical practices made the list of ideas that participants, six of the ten (60%), agreed could assist in transforming the educational system. Sadat X expressed the general sentiment succinctly, “We need to get our educators and cater our course work towards what’s going on in the community.”

In cases where educators seemed to be culturally sensitive and include a variety of texts and points of view in their courses, the participants generally had a more positive response about the teacher and the academic subject. Paradise shares that his positive feelings about one teacher in particular stems from this dynamic. “She was a really good teacher and she let us read things that we were in. She always found stories that had Black people in them, and the Black people in the stories that she had wasn’t slaves, butlers and shoe shine boys.”

While the majority of the comments were like the comments above, there are two that examined the issue and took it a bit further. One discusses the feeling that the curriculum was indeed one-sided, but nevertheless wishes he had mastered it because of its future implications. This participant eventually dropped out of school, but now works as a Dean at a charter school in Harlem. He expressed his thoughts that helped influence his decision to drop out, “Earlier on when I was like, ‘school ain’t for me’ because you’re teaching me but you’re teaching me what you want me to know.” He then goes on to add what life and experience has taught him that he had not contemplated as a youth. “I wish I had had the secondary part of that which is, because I still feel that way, but knowledge is infinite, and any place you obtain knowledge at least you’re obtaining it...I think it’s important that they know both sides of that. They’re only teaching you what they want you to know, but at the same time it’s important and imperative that you have the

piece of paper, even if you're not doing it for the knowledge itself." While agreeing that the lack of curricular inclusion is a problem, the participant has learned that the sacrifice of obtaining an education for its future potential is a worthwhile one, and needs to be more explicitly communicated with African American males struggling with the lack of inclusion.

Big Daddy Kane agrees that curricular inclusion is a problem, but adds that the criticism is appropriate specifically for social science classes, but not so in science and mathematics. "I had a 94 average in math. I was doing excellent in everything except social studies. I was just one of them funny dudes that couldn't necessarily see how American History and Global Studies...especially not what they called American History and not what they called Global Studies was going to help me in the future..." In the larger discussion about whether the lack of curricular inclusion was a valid reason for not doing well academically in school or even dropping out, Kane's response, "I think that's a lame excuse..." While Big Daddy Kane expresses a view that was not common among the participants, it is one that should be investigated further, as race conscious data is increasingly available, and increased comparisons are made with African American males and other racial and ethnic minorities that are succeeding in the educational system despite similar exclusion in the curriculum (Owens & Sunderman, 2006).

The expressions of the participants make it clear that the reaction to the perceived curricular exclusion does not necessarily change their 'abstract' attitudes toward school, their belief that obtaining an education is an important factor for economic success and social mobility, but that it could indeed affect their more 'concrete' attitudes about school and the actual benefits and returns they are likely to enjoy upon obtaining an education (Mickelson, 1990).

Social Needs

A criticism shared by two of the participants deals with the perceived neglect to address the growing social needs of students within the schools. In families with higher socio-economic status, this may not be an issue, however the large number of impoverished households, often with single parents heading them, reveals an important need that schools are being looked upon to fulfill. One participant expressed it this way, “I remember there was a point when I would go into school to make sure I got lunch. Like that’s for real. I’m going late because I don’t want to sit there from 8 am until 12 o’clock to eat because my stomach is killing me. So I’m going in late, I’m going in at 10 and I’ll do lunch. And I noticed early that I always did better in the afternoon classes than I did in the morning classes. For the life of me I couldn’t figure out what it was...it was hard to concentrate hungry.” In this participant’s case, the school offered a fundamental physical need — food, which many educators may not even think about. Researchers have determined that hungry and undernourished children display behaviors that interfere with their academic efforts by contributing to irritability, apathy, lack of energy and difficulty concentrating, leading to the conclusion that “no curriculum is brilliant enough to compensate for a hungry stomach or a distracted mind” (Symons, Cinelli, James, & Groff, 1997).

In more severe cases where a nourishing meal is not a students’ only major concern, some students who are responsible for raising themselves and at times younger siblings are not likely to continue attending school because of their immediate physical needs. One participant, who also was one of the two dropouts in the study revealed, “Other than me putting a roof over my head, my moms kept a roof over my head, but anything else, clothing, food, any and everything else, I took care of from the age of 13. So with all those issues going on school was not the priority. School is not where I need to go, but I wish I did.” The comments about the

social role of schools, although not expressed by a majority of participants, points to the increasing importance that schools play in the lives of students (Symons et al., 1997; Goodlad, 2004).

Career Technical Training

Offering high school students career-technical training has been an area of controversy and discussion for many years, and a criticism voiced by two participants in this study. During troubling economic times these areas are often among the first cut out of educational budgets. KMD was of the opinion that, “One of the biggest missteps in public school is the curriculum isn’t diverse enough for the level of skill sets and job placement opportunities that there are.” However, there are many who believe these course offerings would be helpful in retaining more African American males in school who eventually graduate with marketable skills (Bishop & Mane, 2004). While nationwide the push has been on college access for all, the discussion about career technical and vocational training warrants some attention, as an alternative, although it is not clear whether career technical training benefits African American males to the same degree as it does for other groups (Meer, 2005). While none of the other study participants directly mention career vocational training there were several references made to the importance of supporting arts education and resisting the current trend to cut arts education out of public school course offerings.

The next section will reveal the findings with regard to the second part of the second research question, which looks at ideas for transforming the educational system and schools.

Ideas for Transformation

Parent Involvement

A strongly expressed theme in the area of educational transformation centers on the idea of parental involvement. It makes sense that three out of ten (30%) of the participants would point to parental involvement as an important ingredient in transforming the educational systems, since seven of the ten participants (70%) reported being personally inspired by their parents to believe in the importance of obtaining an education. The participants' responses ranged from being very critical of parents' apparent lack of concern about their child's education, to being more understanding about the societal pressures many families undergo which undermines any persistent and sustained involvement in their children's educational pursuits. DMC's comment on the issue encompasses a combination of both ideas, "If there's no other world available except education then that's what the kids are going to focus on...but I think a lot of parents are just plain damn lazy. If it doesn't have something to do with the daily, roundabout hustle of a household, I don't think the parents are as concerned about an education nowadays as much as making sure that the kids are alright, making sure that the bills are paid, making sure that ends meet. Everybody is in a survival mode, and everybody is so worried, they are not prioritizing their children's education." While DMC's comment may be more relevant for working and middle class African American families, with parents working long hours and multiple jobs in order to maintain their lifestyle, the following comment by Paradise may be more appropriate for African American families living in impoverished urban environments. "It takes healthy families to make healthy communities, and we have broken families so we have broken communities. So it has to start in the home. The parents have to be educated before you can educate children, and parents have to take an active role in their children's education." Poverty and its debilitating

effects on educational equity are clear (Orfield & Lee, 2005) yet the positive effects of parental involvement for African American students is also clear, and more ways to involve parents of African American students at all levels of the educational pipeline needs to be incorporated (Hill & Craft, 2003).

Teacher Performance

One final noteworthy idea for transforming the educational system was offered by only one participant, yet it fits into the current discussion regarding educational reform and teacher performance evaluations. In many school districts nationwide there have been moves to determine how teachers should be more effectively evaluated, possibly tying salary and job security to the evaluations. This ‘value added’ approach is a highly controversial educational reform policy, yet this participant touches on a very interesting point of view regarding the matter.

Kool Moe Dee explained that while he was still a high school student he became increasingly disenchanted with the educational institution and began examining the system in a unique way. Kool Moe Dee explains, “I would ask the teacher, ‘Who’s grading you? I don’t know if your grading skills are good.’ ‘You’re a smart ass.’ ‘I’m not a smart ass.’ I’ve always been that person that says there’s another side to this coin. ‘If ten teachers read this would they all give me the C? Or is this just your interpretation? And who is grading your grading skills?’ ...I was debating with the teachers, I was like the C is a reflection of your grade and your teaching skills. It ain’t on me. I got a C? No, we got a C. You ain’t bringing this across right.” His youthful insight on changing the focus from teacher’s teaching to student’s learning, a shift which has taken hold in higher education (Barr & Tagg, 1995), and raising the issue of secondary

students being involved in teacher performance evaluations is an idea that, while controversial, is timely and should be entered into the current educational reform discussions.

In the next section I will discuss the findings related to the final research question, in what ways, if any, do Hip-Hop artists **promote self-efficacy** toward educational attainment in African American males?

Responses to the research question seeking to determine the participants' views about self-efficacy were varied. The one area where a majority of the participants agreed was in the need for more positive role models for African American male youth in order for them to be more encouraged in their ability to succeed.

Self-Efficacy

Pioneering psychologist and the creator of self-efficacy theory, Albert Bandura, has argued that a substantial amount of valuable knowledge is gained by children via social interactions, and that prominent people in children's lives may contribute significantly to what and how children think about important matters, including school (Bandura, 1986).

Young people often develop strong attitudes, feelings, values and behaviors toward people or places merely from observing the experiences of others they respect. Utilizing comparisons with people from similar backgrounds and characteristics frequently serve as the best basis for comparison (Bandura, 1986). Based on Bandura's theory, appropriate role models can offer details about specific actions that can ultimately lead to success and raise the level of hope among observers that they can also be successful if they follow in similar patterns of behavior (Bandura, 1986; Schunk, 2003).

Role Models

As discussed in a previous section one of the prevailing methods to obtain attitudes and beliefs about education was through the influence of the community, and too frequently that influence has been determined to be negative. In discussing role models and where youth should take their cues regarding educational and career success, Big Daddy Kane suggests that youth must be more selective about where they obtain their information. “People that hang out on the corner or that dropped out of school, and if that’s the life that you designed for yourself... what can you tell me? If you’re not a person that graduated from high school, and ended up broke, without a job, what can you possibly tell me? How can you possibly tell me that school is a waste of time?” Several participants commented on the overemphasis on the lives of athletes, entertainers, and even illicit drug dealers, but role models for professional careers requiring higher levels of education are severely lacking. Paradise explained his view of the paths to success that too many urban, male youth see in their communities, “You go to Pee Wee football, after Pee Wee football you play in school, if you’re good enough you go to college. That’s a clear path to success. The other successful dude is the hustler. The hustler sells drugs, he has the nice car, he has the fine women, he has money in his pocket, he has jewelry on... How many people do we know in these communities who went to school, became an entrepreneur, has a good job and now they’re balling? You don’t know them. You never see them. You don’t hear their stories.” Confirming Paradise’s comments, Sadat X adds, “I never had a goal like I wanted to be a doctor or an architect or something like that. A lot of times that’s not stressed enough in the Black community; it’s always basketball and rapping.” While Sadat X was the only one who shared that he lacked having a career goal other than rapping, the majority of the participants stress that young people in urban communities do, in fact, have professional career goals and

dreams but that there is a missing element to the story that many youth are not exposed to. This can be corroborated with data pointing to the high unemployment rates among African-American males, especially in urban centers (Black, 2010).

In DMC's neighborhood as a youth, which was the middle-class Black community of Hollis, Queens, his parents would frequently point out to him examples of successful individuals that they wanted their child to emulate. "Growing up in Hollis we had Dr. Dees, and my mother and father would point him out and say, 'See that man right there in that big house, he's a doctor, that's why you need to go to school.' They would point people out. Dr. Gossler, who was my pediatrician, my mother would tell me after he would give me a lollipop, she would say, 'You need to be like him.'" For DMC, not only did his parents point out those individuals, but supported him throughout his educational career and made sure that he understood that obtaining an education was an important part of that process and were involved in his educational pursuits. But as Kool Moe Dee explains, many times the important details about the necessary steps to be taken in order to achieve their professional goals is what is missing. KMD expounds further, "Give them tangible stuff and really break it down in saying not only did this work, but let me show you how, here's the connection. Because we just see the beginning and the ending, we don't see the middle...and school is the middle." The comments by the participants confirm aspects of self-efficacy theory, which theorizes that individuals learn valuable information socially, and can develop strong attitudes, feelings and behaviors from observing others they hold in high regard.

To combat the negative information that is all too prevalent in urban environments, and which goes to the heart of this study, several participants discussed the important role that contemporary Hip-Hop artists can play in this regard. DMC comments on Hip-Hop's potential

power in this regard. “For me it isn’t what the rapper is saying that’s so bad, it’s what they’re not saying. Our children do not need to hear another record about pimping. He needs to hear the record about how getting an education will help them lead more productive lives. We have to use Hip-Hop to provide the information because the sources that should be giving it to them are not sufficient.” DMC’s decision to focus on the words and examples of Hip-Hop artists and the potential influence it may have on influencing the educational and career decisions of their young fans also aligns with self-efficacy theory in that young people are believed to learn to fear, dislike and devalue those things that bothered their models before them, or conversely, their fears and dislikes can be lessened where influential role models, like Hip-Hop artists, deliver information and strategies on how to succeed in the educational system (Bandura, 1982).

There was no lack of belief in the participants in their abilities to do well in school. Not one person, even those that did not complete high school, had any doubts about their efficacy to do well and succeed in school. In an interesting turn, the interview protocol questions that sought to gauge self-efficacy in the respondents, and their perception of the self-efficacy of African American males generally resulted in responses that focused more on the factors that negatively affect successful completion of school.

Interest

A lack of interest in school, not a lack of ability to perform, was cited by two of the ten participants as a reason for the struggles experienced by African American males and their disproportionate lack of success in school. LA Sunshine, one of the participants who did not complete high school explains his feelings about school. “My biggest fault was my not being interested and not liking being in the school setting at all. I had no problems thinking I would do well.” LA Sunshine, like many others before and after him, found that one of the biggest

problems he had with school was a lack of interest, a finding that coincides with that of John Goodlad's 'A Place Called School,' where students were asked what was the biggest problem with their school and the most frequent choice was "lack of student interest" (Goodlad, 2004).

The ability to change the interest level of those students who find themselves disinterested in school could play a major role in changing the levels of African American males who stay in school and eventually graduate (Witherspoon, Speight & Thomas, 1997). As Jalil points out, "The most important thing is they don't have interest in it, because if you have interest in it, it would be hard as heck to get you out of that system if that's what you wanted to do." Catterall (1998) claims that overall, most dropouts leave school because of a feeling of failure or alienation. Student disinterest and disengagement can lead to disciplinary problems, high rates of absenteeism or truancy, poor classroom behavior and decreased levels of participation in extracurricular activities (Catterall, 1998), all of which have been linked to lower chances for graduation (Jerald, 2006).

Self-Esteem

Self-esteem is confidence in one's own value, worth or abilities. As I mentioned earlier, there was no lack of confidence in the abilities of the participants in this study to succeed in school, even for those that did not graduate. However, a few mentioned that low self-esteem, stemming from negative social environments, counteracts the feelings of self-efficacy for some African American males. Kool Moe Dee explains, "Even for those who know you should go to school, but have dropped out, it's easier to drop out...again, not that they want to, because once you don't believe that anything is going to happen for you, then it's like, 'Well what am I going to school for?' Because you really don't believe anything is going to happen for you. So that self esteem part of that social environment is like cancer, it's like a toxic situation because we were

really socialized to believe that nothing was going to happen for us. Even up to Biggie, ‘Either you’re slingin’ crack rock or you got a wicked jump shot...’” What KMD describes as self-esteem could also fit into the description offered by researchers like Claude Steele and what he terms ‘academic disidentification,’ because of the view that the paths out of the ‘hood’ are extremely limited, leading to a devaluing and disengagement with academic activities (Steele, 1997). Perhaps an even better example of academic disidentification can be found in the following comment by Paradise, who clearly has no lack of confidence in his general abilities. “I thought I was smarter than all of them, but I just didn’t know what they knew. They were book smarter than me, but when it came to how to evaluate life and how to survive...they could never survive the things I survived.” Paradise, who shared that he graduated number three from his junior high school, was obviously capable academically, but decided to drop out arguably because he devalued the importance of academic performance which had almost no bearing on formation and maintenance of self-perception (Steele, 1997).

I offer the following comment by Chuck D, who recognizes his self-efficacy to perform academically, but also offers a realistic self-analysis of his lack of effort to explain his academic struggles while a college student. “Even when you try to fool yourself but you ask yourself the question who the fuck are you really fooling? I would go to class sit down, I’d have a pen and my pad...coming in there like, alright I missed four classes coming in there sitting in the front acting like I really knew what was going on. I didn’t even know the professor’s name.” The discrepancy between the perceived self-efficacy of African American males in their educational abilities, and the discrepancies between their academic efforts to achieve at the levels that they believe they are capable of may partially be explained by the ‘attitude-achievement’ paradox offered by researchers which seeks to explain the positive verbalized expressions of African

American students about education and its importance, yet the persistent levels of underachievement and lack of consistent academic behaviors to achieve (Mickelson, 1990).

In the next chapter I will discuss the salient findings, implications, and recommendations for subsequent leadership implementation and actions based on the results of this study, and suggest potential areas for further study and research.

CHAPTER 5

Introduction

The enduring struggles of African-American male students in America's public school system has been well documented, and the troubling data has been discussed by policy makers, administrators, educators, parents, community organizers, and others who are able to see the long term impact that failing schools will have on the larger community and nation. The purpose of this study was to give an over-looked, yet highly respected group of African-American 'opinion leaders' and youth 'role models' an opportunity to express their views regarding educational reform, with a particular emphasis on improving rates of academic success for African American male students throughout the educational pipeline.

The ten Hip-Hop artists that participated in this study expressed generally positive views about the value of obtaining, a combination of negative and positive educational experiences and offered practical ideas for transforming the current educational system such that it will be an environment where more African-American male students can find success alongside their peers.

The research questions that drove this study were:

1. What experiences, beliefs, and attitudes do Hip Hop artists articulate about education, its potential and purposes?
2. In what ways, if any, do Hip Hop artists critique the educational system and offer ideas for its transformation?
3. In what ways, if any, do Hip Hop artists promote self-efficacy toward educational attainment in African American high school males?

In this final chapter, I discuss the practical implications that can influence how school leaders and educators can better relate and serve African-American male students. I also discuss limitations of the study and opportunities for further research. Before I address the school and

educational system related implications, I will begin by discussing the reasons why Hip-Hop artists, as public intellectuals, can serve as an important resource in the educational reform discourse.

Hip Hop Connectivity

When asked about the contribution Hip-Hop artists can make in helping African-American males improve academically, several of the study participants referenced young Hip-Hop artists that are ‘popular’ and commercially viable, who could have a big impact on the mindset of today’s youth with the release of a song about the importance of obtaining an education and excelling in school. For that reason I wanted to include a heterogeneous sample of Hip-Hop participants with regard to their ages and geographic representativeness. However, as the participants began to refer others who they felt would be willing to participate in this study, a sampling method known as snowball sampling, I ended up with an all ‘old school,’ New York based sample of artists. All of the study participants are over 40-years-old, the age of the parents of many current Hip-Hop artists. In hindsight, the role and value of ‘old school’ artists, as an underutilized link to address social problems faced by the African American community offers benefits I had not considered previously. In discussing this issue, Kool Moe Dee’s words help to make the point.

“I think we consistently undervalue our connection. That’s like doing something with jazz and not going to Quincy Jones because he’s not hot... We can’t let pop or mainstream America give us our cues on us. They don’t live it, they don’t come from it, and they’re looking at it from the outside looking in, and the only value they can see in us...this is the biggest problem I have with mainstream America, is all we represent is market share and market value. We don’t represent palpable, tangible life...you need popular names to get people in the seats, to

get people to listen. Not necessarily, but that's the part that they keep selling you because they don't have a connection. So it doesn't matter if I'm hot or popular or not, that's just the pop side of the equation, but the tangible side of the equation is not only is it still viable based on the fact that these guys are hot, there's millions of people in the age group that have kids that...if I'm valid to them and they understand, then it still has validity...it's way more than just the music, and it's much more about what we have to say than what we have to sing.”

Kool Moe Dee's view aligns with leadership thinkers who contend that in a postmodern society market value, based in conspicuous consumption, can only be legitimate if it can lead to market profitability. Voices or ideas that are no longer considered commercially viable are silenced, and those with market potential become co-opted (Dantley, 2005). This study, using artists who would be considered past their commercial prime, affirms their validity and value based on their vast experience and precisely because they are able to contribute in ways that younger artists cannot.

As Hip-Hop reaches maturity and increasingly becomes utilized as a lens researchers use to analyze and investigate worthwhile topics affecting youth, the thought process of an individual who is 40-50 years old, who has been in the industry for 20-25 years would arguably have more insight and experience than a younger, less experienced participant would have to offer in terms of education and information.

Additionally, the people who will be familiar with and interested in what pioneering Hip-Hop artists have to say would likely be from a similar age group, many with children of school attending age, and therefore some of the ideas and discussions about educational reform can connect with both parents, and through the parents, connect with their school-aged children. As discussed in the previous chapter, finding a way to connect with and engage parents is critical

due to the influence they have in shaping the views about the value of an education in their children (Trotman, 2001).

A final reason Hip-Hop artists are critical as sources of data in seeking solutions for issues impacting African-American males is because they are known for their ability to transmit urban realities, unpleasant as they may be, with honesty and vivid detail. It is this honesty and transparency that is frequently left out of ‘achievement gap’ and high school dropout discussions as they regard African American males — the student’s culpability in the academic struggles they face. That is not to say that the larger structural societal issues such as poverty, institutional racism, and inequitable resource distribution which have been and continue to be major factors in the struggles of African American students to receive equal access to a quality education, go unanalyzed.

Amongst this study’s participants only one discussed his role in the academic struggles he faced. “I went to school and my first year at Adelphi, my freshman year I went to all of the parties...never went to class...you try to fool yourself but you ask yourself the question, who the fuck are you really fooling? I would go to class, sit down, I’d have a pen and my pad...I missed four classes coming in there sitting in the front acting like I really knew what was going on. I didn’t even know the professor’s name...Then after a while sometimes when I went to class I would come out of class, go to the gym, play some ball and come back to the class, and sit in the front with a pen...this woman looked at me like, “You must be crazy.” I think her name was Doctor Cook, I don’t even know. All I know is...I was kind of half stepping...” The admission by Chuck D, an analysis of his own lack of effort in his studies is in my view an important self-realization that needs to be addressed, discussed and confronted, and Hip-Hop artists can potentially serve as a viable group to lead that discussion.

Another ‘old school’ artist, Ice-T, who wrote the introduction for a publication I co-authored entitled, *Uprising: Crips and Bloods Tell the Story of America’s Youth in the Crossfire* opines, “The last person we blame for our problems is ourselves. Most of us have looked for too many shortcuts. People come to my house and think they can get what I have by next year. They don’t understand that what I’ve obtained is from thirteen years of hard work and sacrifice...Now if you take the same thirteen years and go to school, you’ll come out being a Ph.D. and you can do the same thing, or if you take the same thirteen years and focus on what it is that you want, then you will be successful...” (Jah & Shah’Keyah, 1995). Ice-T’s comment about the effort, personal responsibility and sacrifice that is required in order to achieve success in school and in life is often avoided, and should not be, especially since research has shown that there is often a discrepancy between the verbalized views toward education expressed by many African-American students and their academic behaviors (Mickelson, 1990). This discrepancy between what African American students express about the importance of an education and their academic behaviors, can at least be partially explained by Ice-T’s assessment that often times young African Americans don’t establish long term plans to reach their goals for a variety of reasons, nor do they make the required sacrifices or put forth the necessary effort to reach their goals, in spite of the existing reality of poverty, systemic inequalities and institutional racism.

Ice-T continues, “The first thing is that you have to admit that you’ve been messing up, you have to admit that you BS’d through school, you have to admit your shortcomings. One of the best comments I’ve ever heard was, ‘The best weapon against racism is excellence.’ That says it all...Our problem is that we’re not striving to be excellent, we’re all right, but when you’re excellent in something, when you’ve mastered it, when you are the best at what you do, then you would have a job. You have to be the best.” Without this type of honest self-implicating

discussion, the solutions that will be developed regarding larger societal and school based issues will only confront part of the problem. This is not to say that African American youth need to bear the brunt of all of the blame, or to be revealed as the cause of their academic and educational difficulties, but from a self-empowerment and self-deterministic point of view recognize that individuals can play and must play a transformational role in their own educational and life outcomes. As Freire stated, “If true commitment to the people, involving the transformation of the reality by which they are oppressed, requires a theory of transforming action, this theory cannot fail to assign the people a fundamental role in the transformation process” (Freire, 1970). Hip-Hop artists will potentially allow, because of the respect they receive from different segments of society, comprehensive discussions to transpire that develops realistic, implementable actions to the educational challenges facing African American youth both internally, through instilling a sense of agency, and externally.

Now I will discuss some of the larger policy and practice implications of this study for school leaders and educators, as schools try to improve educational access and outcomes for all.

Implications for School Leaders & Educators

School is Important

Comments critical of African American youth in urban communities often center around the erroneous belief that African American students don't care about their education, and some critics go further to add, and neither do their parents (Noguera, 2001). While this study's sample of ten participants is not large enough to generalize to the entire population, it clearly shows that for this sample and for many of their peers, obtaining an education was seen as important and valuable, both for themselves and their parents. If school administrators and educators begin to hone in on the fact that African American students value obtaining an education at least as much

as other groups of students, and seek to develop non-deficit models to explain the academic struggles of many African American male students, more could be done to improve the academic chances of success for African American males in America's public schools (McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004).

An excellent place for schools to start would be to fill urban classrooms with qualified teachers who are trained and prepared to teach in culturally relevant ways in schools with large African American populations. Systematically school districts, with the cooperation of teacher unions, can reform hiring and placement decisions for schools in impoverished urban communities to insure that less experienced and less effective teachers are not placed to teach in schools with the highest need (Darling-Hammond & Berry, 2006; O'Day, 2005). Not that novice teachers cannot find success in urban schools, but research shows that many of the best qualified and experienced teachers continue to work in communities where the academic and social needs of the students are not as severe as those in high poverty urban schools (Darling-Hammond & Berry, 1999). This reality results in a situation where those students in need of the most help, are taught in classrooms by teachers new to the profession, and unfamiliar with some of the proven, successful strategies that are more effective with low performing students.

Counseling

A second practical implication that schools can draw from this study is the need to provide more practical and realistic counseling about educational and career options, as well as offering explicit detail about the economic and social effects that dropping out of school has on individuals, families and communities. It has been shown that within schools, counselors serve a critical role in improving graduation rates and college enrollments, and can positively impact students' aspirations and achievements (McDonough, 2005). By doing so, the level of interest for

African American male students to align their desires to graduate from school with their actual academic behaviors may increase. Many times the discussions about dropping out of school, or the benefits of staying in school, are done in such a way that students don't actually get the message about how critical it is to receive an education. As Kool Moe Dee explains,

“But there's nothing tangible. It's like lip service. It becomes cliché to say...I remember being mad when I would see the junkie guy, “Come here y'all,” and he's nodding. “Come here, get over here.” And because he's older you go. “What you want Mr. Bill?” “Y'all doing good in school? Stay in school now.” “Alright Mr. Bill.” But it doesn't have any weight because...for me it's like that's just the shit all the adults say...”

Doing poorly in school, and ultimately dropping out has some very real consequences, but many students are not fully aware of the detrimental impact that their actions and decisions will have on their lives until it is often too late. Kool Moe Dee goes further to elucidate the message that seems not to be connecting with many African American males, “That quitting [school] is quitting on yourself, you're not quitting on the system, because the system goes on without you anyway, and quite frankly in many ways the system doesn't want you in it, flourishing at least. And you will be in the system, but just on the other side...to the jail side of the equation, because they're building jails for those guys that make those missteps.” Having counselors, inspirational speakers, educational and community leaders, or rappers, be allowed to speak to students, and explicitly explain the reasons why an education is so important, and the statistical difference between the typical life outcomes of a dropout versus a high school and college graduate, and backing that message up with the proper support systems so that African American males are convinced and supported in ways to reinforce the message that quitting school is not an option (Harlow, 2003; Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison, 2006). The urgency to deliver the message is paramount, yet it is my belief that Hip-Hop artists, both past and present, can serve a unique role in delivering the message.

Parent Engagement

School districts and individual schools must find ways to involve and engage parents at a more meaningful level in their child's education. Research has shown that children whose parents are involved in their schooling can significantly increase their academic persistence and achievement (Turnbull & Turnbull, 1997), can positively impact student behavior (Nweze, 1993), and can decrease the number of student suspensions (Frazier, 1997). In the sample of participants in this study seven out of ten revealed that they were inspired to obtain an education by their parents. In the three participants who did not express that their parents inspired them, two out of the three reported dropping out of school. DMC commented on the apparent difficulties of getting more African American parents involved, "If it doesn't have something to do with the daily, roundabout hustle of a household, I don't think the parents are as concerned about an education nowadays as much as making sure that the kids are alright, making sure that the bills are paid, making sure that ends meet. Everybody is in a survival mode, and everybody is so worried they are not prioritizing their children's education."

Conscious of the influence parents have on their kids, yet also being mindful of the economic realities that many families face, finding ways to reengage parents through establishing positive rapport, support, and communication, especially in underserved communities, can be an important strategy to turnaround the troubling academic records of many African-American students. In an article by Michelle Trotman (2001) discussing the involvement of African American parents she lists several recommendations to increase the level of involvement by urban African American parents. Among the listed ideas that I agree with are;

1. Encouraging and educating parents and/or guardians how to remain or become active in their child's educational process. Stressing the importance that they serve very influential role in their child's views toward education.

2. Make sure that each child attends school regularly.
3. Establish positive, respectful relations with parents. It may help to communicate with parents when students are doing well and exhibiting effort, and not only when problems arise. This may help to eliminate the negative perspective some parents may hold have toward schools from their own experiences.

Establishing positive, respectful relationships with parents is critical, because of the high value placed on respect in African American communities. Once again, the value of involving and utilizing ‘old school’ artists such as those featured in this study can prove extremely useful in capturing the attention and immediate respect of a much larger pool of parents because of the familiarity and esteem with which many parents hold these artists. Parents and their children insist on respectful relationships, which lead to the next implication for schools and educators.

Relationships Are Key

One of the significant findings of this study was the perceived need to develop more authentic, caring relationships between teachers and students. Eight of the ten participants (80%) shared the critique that there is a pervasive disconnect between many African American male students and the teachers responsible to teach them and the administrators charged with leading them.

There are many challenges and obstacles to make the structural changes necessary to create an environment where students and teachers are able to create the personal connections and relationships many students desire. While many school districts have been making moves toward small learning communities and more personalized learning environments, public schools can learn something from the private schools and the success they have found in maintaining such environments. Students at exclusive private schools are afforded close, personal

relationships with their teachers and the schools are intentionally structured this way in order to allow those relationships to develop because of this key understanding, “Small classrooms consistently address the issue of children and pose that students cannot disappear or slip through passively, deeper relationships by all involved as ‘human beings’ and they allow teachers to focus on individuals as learners for more individualized instruction” (Powell, 1996). This aspect of personalization, where each student is accepted for their humanness and individuality, and regarded as important members of the community by both staff and other students, and in which individual, personal, and academic needs are addressed is something sorely missing in many public school classrooms (Levin et al., 2007; Darling-Hammond, 2001). Overcrowded classrooms, fueled by state budget cuts, serves as a real impediment to more personalized learning environments proven to be effective in relating to youth. In a study of successful urban schools one student commented on the benefits he experienced in this environment, “You get to interact with your teachers a whole lot more and get to know them. When you’re learning from a friend, not just some random person, it’s a lot easier to learn” (Darling-Hammond & Friedlaender, 2008). While the costs associated with smaller learning communities and smaller schools would increase in the short-term, the long term economic benefits for states and the nation would be positive as measured by several metrics (Levin et al. 2007), and more importantly it will provide increased access to a quality education that all students deserve. As Linda Darling-Hammond writes, “Small size is a necessary condition for effective schooling, but it is not enough” (Darling-Hammond, 2001).

Regardless to the size of the class, gender or race of the teacher, an important qualification for successfully teaching African American males is to have knowledge of, exposure to, and understanding of their cultural backgrounds in order to develop genuine,

‘authentic’ relationships. The authentic, caring relationship, will be characterized by a core commitment by teachers to show students, “their concern for the implications their work had on their students’ lives, the welfare of the community, and unjust social arrangements...” The students need to know that their teachers are committed to preparing them for confronting ‘inequitable and undemocratic social structures’ (Ladson-Billings, 1995). In this study several examples of these types of relationships were shared. One occurred when DLB expressed his thoughts about a teacher who, “she really took me to task and made me respect myself before...before scolding me about disrespecting her, she got on me about disrespecting myself...She took extra time with not only me, but with other classmates.” Paradise discussed the lack of a connection, “They look at us and see the thug, the criminal.” Sadat X highlights the component of caring which extends beyond the school day, “Some of these people are here, they’re going to get a check, and at 3 o’clock they turn it off and they’re going home. They don’t care what happens after 3 o’clock with these kids.” Finally, LA Sunshine focuses on understanding, “I think it’s very important that you can understand the kids more so than anything else, and that would lend itself to cats being easily accepting of going to school.” These critical elements of student-teacher relationships would likely have an impact on the level of learning and levels of respect both inside and outside of the classroom. When students know that their teachers care, believe in them, and hold high expectations for them, students will respond with increased levels of effort and production.

Relevant Curriculum/ Relevant Pedagogy

While none of the participants specifically discussed the national trend toward high stakes, standardized testing, I believe the overemphasis on these tests will lead many educators to move away from socio-cultural teaching strategies and techniques proven to be more effective

and engaging for students of color. Whether it is the content (what) or the mode (how) of teaching, both can have an impact on how African American males perform academically (Sleeter & Grant, 1999). It has been shown that African American students prefer learning environments that are more cooperative, collaborative, and allow more physical movement than other racial groups, and that classrooms that prohibit physical movement often lead to increased behavioral issues (Hale-Benson, 1986). While many of the strategies which work best for African American students are known, the breadth of material that educators feel pressured to cover in preparation for national standardized tests may prevent these more effective strategies from being implemented, due to the fact that they often require more time to execute effectively (Townsend, 2000). Whether it's adjusting approaches through pedagogy, or shifting the paradigm from teacher covering subjects to students learning, Kool Moe Dee gives a clear example of what we're not talking about as an effective approach. "I don't understand," [teacher responds], "Well we have to move on." [Student exclaims] "But I don't understand though." So three people caught it, ten people are iffy on it, fifteen people didn't catch it but we're moving on, because the teacher has a syllabus and a day to finish... And they just keep moving so you never really get the special attention for those that are faster or slower." If this was the experience long before high stakes testing was in place nationally, one can only imagine what transpires in urban classrooms throughout the country.

Role Models

A final implication for this study that could help to inform schools and educational leaders is the importance of exposing male African American students to African American men who could be considered as role models. As several of the study participants point out, there continues to be a shortage of African American male teachers within the educational system. For

many African American males, especially from the inner city, the number of positive role models that are visible, who work in a professional capacity, is extremely limited. This reality was discussed by Paradise as he answered one of my interview questions with a question of his own, “How many people do we know in these communities who went to school...has a good job and now they’re balling? You don’t know them. You never see them. You don’t hear their stories.” Young African American males, like other racial and ethnic groups, need people that they can relate to and model themselves after in order to pursue occupations and careers that have post secondary requirements (Bandura, 1986). It’s one thing to tell young people that they can achieve anything that they desire, it’s entirely more empowering to show them examples, and explain in detail what is involved in order to achieve it. Without those examples, and without that information, many youth will be left like Sadat X who admits, “I never had a goal like I wanted to be a doctor or an architect or something like that. A lot of times that’s not stressed enough in the Black community. It’s always basketball and rapping. I tell these kids now, listen, be an architect, be a doctor, be this, be that, because it seems like we always wind up bouncing the ball or holding the mic.” Beyond simply saying inspirational things to youth, Sadat X continues, “Because this is a digital seeing age, and these kids need to see it, because we can tell them what we need to tell them, but we need to find these young, Black, dynamic doctors and bring them to the school.”

Finding ways to bring Black professionals to address African American students will be one challenge for educational leaders and educators interested in finding ways to better serve their students. Partnering with Black professional organizations, Black Greek letter organizations, Black churches, and re-envisioning the school as being a part of the community and fully utilizing the resources within that community to help lift the standards and aspirations

of African American students while they are in school and beyond. Hip-Hop artists, both ‘old school’ and ‘new school’ can play a positive role in this area, but one major hurdle would need to be overcome— fear and distrust from older individuals who are not very familiar with the range of artists and the level of intellect of many artists with the Hip-Hop genre. Big Daddy Kane shares an experience that highlights my point. “A lot of people love what I have to say, but I think people are so stupid that they think that if I went in front of a bunch of kids I’d start cursing and all that. So they’re kinda scared to ask me to. But I would love to.” Finding creative and appropriate ways for Hip-Hop artists to interact with both students who look up to them, and teachers/staff could do a lot to bridge the current gap between the two sides.

Limitations

Although themes emerged from the data collected, there were also limitations in the study. The limitation stems from the sampling methodology used. The use of snowball sampling, which relied on participants to assist in identifying other potential subjects through their personal contacts, resulted in a lack of diversity in the ages and geographical representation of the Hip Hop participants. It would have been interesting to compare and contrast insights, experiences or ideas about transforming schools across age groups, and also to see if there would be any significant differences in the insights, experiences and ideas from artists from different geographical regions. There has been lots of discussions within the Hip Hop community about the changes within Hip Hop music and the apparent lack of social and political consciousness and the overemphasis on conspicuous consumption in the lyrical content of the majority of contemporary artists, and it may have been possible to get a glimpse of some of those

differences, if in fact they do exist, in the thoughts and ideas of Hip Hop artists from younger demographic categories.

Another limitation stems from the fact that in developing the research questions for the study, I did not ask the participants any direct questions about their efforts to do well academically, or any responsibility they may feel in the outcomes and experiences they had while attending school. This line of questioning would have helped to determine if there is a general feeling that there is a lack of responsibility and effort, alluded to in Ice-T's comments, and if so, to what degree it exists amongst the study participants, and their analysis of the broader trends amongst African American youth.

Further Research

The current study was a good beginning to include an important group of highly respected public intellectuals to determine their explicit views on education and educational reform beyond their song lyrics. There will be future opportunities to continue in this line of research by conducting a similar study of younger and more geographically diverse group of artists. It would be also be interesting to test the quantitative effects, if any, that exposure to the ideas about educational reform of Hip-Hop artists has on the academic behaviors and views toward education of African American students. While public relations firms and commercial enterprises large and small are convinced in the selling power of Hip Hop artists to affect consumer buyer behavior, a study to determine if there can be a similar effect on students' educational views and academic behaviors would be informative.

Based on the importance and frequency of discussions about role models, another promising area of research would be to conduct a longitudinal study on the effects of racially similar role models on African American males. Research to see if there is any significant effect

on young African American students' attitudes and actions when they are exposed to detailed information about African American professionals, from a variety of respected fields, discussing details about their educational, career and personal journeys.

Conclusion

More than 50 years after the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, there are still major problems facing African American students in America's public schools. Research has shown that schools populated by minority students in urban centers continue to struggle to provide equal access to a quality education for millions of its students. Closing the racial 'achievement gap' and correcting the disproportionate dropout rates of African American males from America's schools is, in my view, one of the most important civil rights issues of our time. It is also the singular most important issue that the Hip Hop community should be united to address. As Big Daddy Kane expressed, "I feel like the groundwork that was laid down by others such as Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Huey P. Newton, Medgar Evers...even when you watch concerts like Watts Stax, Save the Children...that is so influential that it makes you understand the power of the voice and what you can do for your people with your voice." The words and voices of the Hip-Hop Nation, arguably, the most dynamic and influential global youth movement of the past quarter-century, must not remain silent as the struggle for educational access and excellence continues, and the health of countless lives, families, and the entire nation lies in the balance.

Appendix A: Interview Protocol

I. Experiences with School/Attitude Towards School

Warm-Up Question: Tell me about the schools you attended growing up and for how long?

1. How would you describe yourself as a student?
2. * Did you and your friends ever have discussions about school and its purposes? If so, tell me about what you talked about with your friends.
3. * Did your friends' attitudes about school influence you? Can you give me an example?
4. Did you know anyone who believed that doing well in school was a sign of "selling out" or "acting white"? Tell me about that.
5. * How did other people's attitudes about school influence you such as parents, teachers, people in the community? (Ask for examples on each of these)
6. * Tell me about the teacher who had the biggest impact on your life. How did this teacher influence you?
7. Before becoming a rap artist what were your professional/career goals?
8. *Do you feel that school adequately prepared you for life beyond school? Why or why not? In what ways? (Optional)*

II. Self-Efficacy

9. * Did you believe that you were capable of doing well in school when you were young? Why or why not?
10. While in school, did you ever have doubts or fears about whether you could be successful? Please provide examples.
11. * Where did your beliefs about your capabilities come from? (environment, parents, community, friends, self)
12. * Did you have social/community support to motivate you to complete high school? Tell me about that.

III. School Improvement/Student Engagement

13. * Why do you think a disproportionate amount of Black males drop out of school?
14. * Do you think male minority students want to do well in school, get good grades or go to college? Why or why not?
15. What do you think makes a school a good place for kids?
16. Think about male minority students who do well in school. What is their attitude toward homework, studying, attendance, and preparing for college? Now think about male minority students who are failing in school. What is their attitude toward homework, studying, attendance, and preparing for college?
17. Do you think there is a difference in the way male and female minority students view school and the value of getting an education? Why do you think that is? Please explain.
18. * What do you think would turn around the dropout problem around for minority youth? What's the solution? What do you think would get minority youth more interested in obtaining an education? (Motivation, Role models)
19. * What, if anything, have you learned about the value of an education that you did not realize when you were younger that you would share with young people currently in school?
20. * In what ways, if any, can rap artists help change the way youth view obtaining an education?
21. How would you recommend for male minority students to approach their education in order achieve success within the system?
22. * How can we help students to see the value of getting an education?

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