Hip Hoe to Hip Ho*P*e:
Hip Hop Pedagogy in a
Secondary Language Arts Curriculum

by

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Abstract

This qualitative case study examines how students in an inner city high school engage with hip hop and how it informs their understanding of issues around race, identity and social agency. More specifically, the research focuses on three hip hop venues organized and led by students in the form of rap, dance and/or poetry slam events, that operate at school outside the formal curriculum and class timetable.

Framed within sociocultural and poststructural perspectives on race, identity and social agency, this research examines how contemporary writings on popular culture, hip hop and critical pedagogy intersect and provide a useful lens for analyzing these hip hop venues. The study is grounded in an interpretive epistemology and qualitative approaches were used to gather data through individual and focus group interviews, observations and a collection of artefacts.

The research reveals that in their discourse on hip hop, some students reproduced racial classification schemes, while others called into question their marginalization and enacted alternate identities.

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Keywords: Hip hop; Secondary Language Arts curriculum; Canadian context; race; identity; social agency

Dedication

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1. *Yo Hit It!*: Introduction

In hip hop, rather than using conventional English to communicate the beginning or introduction of something, the expression, "Yo, hit it" is often employed. Hip hop is music, rhythm, rhyme, dance, poetry, attitude, dress and even language. Hip hop vernacular is on one level a creation of a new youthful discourse, but it is also a challenge to the dominant culture's stranglehold on the English language. It does not want to be proper, orthodox, formal, standard nor respected English. For example, not capitalizing the "h's" in hip hop could be interpreted as poor grammar by traditionalists, but it could also be a conscious political statement by revolutionaries of language. Hip hop exercises both poetic and political license. Similarly, not capitalizing the words "black" and "blackness" throughout this document is a way of poking holes at the dominant discourse on "proper" practice in English writing conventions. Like belle hooks, who refuses to be enslaved by the conventions of the dominant culture, not capitalizing black and hip hop is my political stance here.

In its original conception in urban centres in the United States in the 1970s, hip hop music offered a much needed venue for self and social expression for black people who were perpetually silenced by the white dominant culture (Abdullah, 2006). Through this socially conscious and politically charged genre of music, hip hop artists crafted poignant lyrics with catchy street beats that on one level allowed them to voice frustration, fear and anger over their history of oppression suffered at the hands of the dominant culture, while on another level permitted them to spread a powerful message of hope that positive social change could come to the black community (Boyd, 2002). However, the recent evolution of some contemporary hip hop music beginning in the late-1980s and early 1990s has seen much of the once socially conscious and politically progressive musical form reshaped into a more corporate driven, money-making music factory that pumps out millions of recordings filled with endorsements for materialism, violence, misogyny, sexism and homophobia (Dimitriadis, 2001).

In April 1991 I was first exposed to hip hop music and culture when I participated in a student exchange program between my Vancouver school and an inner city, all-black school in southwest Atlanta, Georgia. At Daniel McLaughlin Therrell High School, I was surrounded by the daily sounds, sights and attitudes of hip hop culture, where the music and the lifestyle were readily embraced and celebrated by the student population. It was their music, their history, their culture and their plight, pulsating from their "ghetto blasters." This initial exposure to the power of hip hop piqued my interest back then and continued to do so many years after my stay in Atlanta.

When I became a practicing Secondary Language Arts teacher in the British Columbia public school system in the late-1990s, I began informally observing the influence of hip hop on my students and started to wonder how this discourse could help to inform my practice and the curriculum. As I gained more experience and confidence in my teaching, I experimented with my pedagogy by bringing into the classroom the hip hop I was familiar with and listening to. I also encouraged my students to contribute to our study of poetry by sharing rap lyrics from their hip hop collection as well as writing their original raps in place of more traditional sonnets, ballads and haikus. Hip hop in my classroom back then was more of an appendix to the Language Arts curriculum rather than a promotion of critical consciousness about social issues.

It was not until 2006, when I was seconded by Simon Fraser University to work with pre-service teachers, that I began a more academic exploration of hip hop. My position in the university's teacher education program involved supervising student teachers in an international teaching site and also afforded me another opportunity to observe hip hop in another setting similar to Atlanta, Georgia. It was in Trinidad and Tobago that I developed an even deeper level of understanding and appreciation for hip hop and its intersection with the country's history and culture. From speaking with some academics and a music instructor at the local University of the West Indies, as well as resident high school students who were studying hip hop in the classroom and other acquaintances I met during my stay, I learned about some of the rich history of music in Trinidad and Tobago and how central it is to their past and their present. In particular, Trinidad and Tobago's colonial beginnings and history of black slavery continue to influence its current socio-cultural-economic-political landscape, including the way many young people engage with hip hop. For the predominantly black population of Trinidad

and Tobago, hip hop not only speaks to the people's past struggle for independence from their white slave masters, it also voices their current battle to challenge the dominant white culture's control of the country's resources, employment and other opportunities.

After the completion of my tenure in the Trinidad and Tobago position in 2008, I returned to my role as a Secondary Language Arts teacher in an inner-city designated school that I call *Mosaic High* in this thesis, in one of British Columbia's largest school districts. Although Trinidad and Tobago, and Atlanta are geographically and culturally distinct with a predominantly black population and a deep rooted tradition of hip hop unlike British Columbia, I did not have to look beyond my English classroom to see that many of my students, the majority of whom are not black, are just as enamoured and engaged with hip hop as their counterparts in the United States and the Caribbean. It was at *Mosaic High* that I paid closer attention to how my students engage with hip hop beyond just the lyrics they would bring to class during a poetry unit. I was also curious about the hip hop they did not believe would be considered acceptable in a formal school and classroom context. When I asked my students in 2009 to let me sample some of the hip hop blasting through their iPod earphones, the popular musical artists on their playlists were Tupac, T.I., T-Pain, Akon, 50 Cent, Kanye West, Lil' Wayne, Flo Rider, Snoop Doggy Dog, Biggie Smalls, Notorious B.I.G. Nas, Eminem, Ice-T, Busta Rhymes, Method Man and many others with similar sounds, looks and attitudes. They were listening to the kind of music that the majority of youth in Atlanta and Trinidad and Tobago, as well as many parts of the world, are listening to. Hip hop is not only an American and African rooted phenomenon, it is global and local. The excerpts below represent a sampling of the lyrics from the students' popular hip hop catalogue.

> I'll take you to the candy shop / I'll let you lick the lollipop / Go 'head girl, don't you stop / Keep going till you hit the spot… ("Candy Shop" – 50 Cent)

> A young Nigga screams fuck the world and let 'em die / Behind tints tryna' duck the world and smoking rie… ("Fuck The World" – Lil Wayne)

> When I hit ya, I split you to the white meat / You swung on like you slumber right, you fell to the concrete / Your face, my feet, they meet, we're stompin'… ("Ready To Die" – Notorious B.I.G.)

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My words are like a dagger with a jagged edge / That will stab you in the head / Whether you're a fag or lez / Or the homosex, hermaph, or a trans-a-vest / Pants or dress, hate fags? / The answer's "yes"… ("Criminal" – Eminem)

They say we are N-I Double G-E-R / We are much more / Still we chose to ignore / The obvious / Man this history don't acknowledge us / We was scholars long before colleges… ("N.I.G.G.E.R." – Nas)

I see no changes / All I see is racist faces / Misplaced hate makes disgrace to races we under / I wonder what it takes to make this one better place… ("Changes" – Tupac)

These Canadian teenagers download this kind of music into their iPods, memorize the lyrics word-for-word and watch the corresponding music videos on Much Music or through Podcasts, Vevo and YouTube. They FaceBook, MySpace and Tweet about their favourite current tunes, sharing with their friends snippets of the lyrics to popular hip hop hits like the ones presented earlier. They purchase the apparel and paraphernalia they see in the videos and strut the school halls, posing and mimicking the gestures, enunciations and attitudes of their musical idols, all the while spitting out lyrics to "Candy Shop," "Fuck The World," "Ready To Die," "Criminal," "N.I.G.G.E.R.," and "Changes."

1.1. *Whatcha Say?*: Inquiry

"Whatcha Say?" is urban vernacular for "What did you say?" which is a shorthand expression used by an individual when inquiring about something for clarification and understanding. My research aims at better understanding how students in a Canadian school setting engage with hip hop and how this impacts their perceptions of the world. Although the scholarship on hip hop and critical pedagogy has been growing in the past ten years, most of the current studies are from an American viewpoint. The aims of this research are to contribute to the relatively new field of the study of hip hop and critical pedagogy from a Canadian perspective by tapping into the experiences and insights of inner-city students who embrace this musical discourse in their daily lives.

Given that in my Master's thesis I examined students' response to humour and the discourse in popular culture on race, identity and social agency, I began to wonder

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how hip hop is informing young people's understanding of these three constructs. In this study, I expand on my previous research by asking the following questions:

- How do students engage with hip hop discourse?
- How does their engagement inform their understanding of race, identity and social agency?
- And how can students' engagement with hip hop discourse help make the Secondary Language Arts curriculum more inclusive and relevant?

To help answer the above questions, I conducted a qualitative study of secondary school aged students' engagement with hip hop at *Mosaic High*. Using a case study methodology, I investigated how a particular group of students at *Mosaic High* engages with hip hop outside the formal curriculum and after the school bell, but within the confines of the school walls. Specifically I studied three hip hop influenced venues at *Mosaic High*: (a) *Speak* [the school Poetry Slam event], (b) the *Mosaic High Dance Team* and, (c) *Access Denied* [the school rap group]. Data were collected through observations, artefact collection and individual interviews. Additionally, I assembled a focus group comprised of students interested in delving deeper into issues about hip hop and collected data from these group interviews. Furthermore, a small group of students, who was not part of the focus group nor affiliated with one of the hip hop venues at *Mosaic High* but expressed interest in participating in the research was also individually interviewed. Finally, a number of teachers at *Mosaic High* who were extensively involved in supporting and sponsoring the students' hip hop initiatives were also individually interviewed for the study.

1.2. *Line 'Em Up*: Organization

"Line 'em up" essentially means putting things in order so that one can approach a task in a more organized and methodical way.

This research consists of eight chapters, including this introduction chapter. The following section outlines and previews the contents of each chapter, describing the

literature review, methodology, data analysis and interpretation, and research findings and recommendations.

Chapters 2 and 3 will review the literature that theoretically grounds the research. In particular Chapter 2 focuses on the first set of two central research themes: popular culture/pedagogy and race, and their intersection with hip hop. Here I am interested in what theorists have to say about popular culture and education. I am also interested in the sociocultural phenomenon of hip hop, from its origins in Africa and urban American centres to its current place in youth popular culture and academic discourse. Since the discourse of race is fundamental to hip hop, the second part of Chapter 2 will explore the dimensions of race from a number of perspectives. I further ground my theoretical conception of race in a contemporary, Canadian and education perspective by concentrating on issues around dominant culture, classification, normalization and marginalization. The final section of Chapter 2 moves from conceptualizing race to the discourse of race found in hip hop.

In Chapter 3, I introduce the second set of central research themes: identity and social agency, and their connection with hip hop. I look at how identity is understood from a sociocultural perspective. I continue the chapter by exploring how identity construction operates in hip hop discourse. The second half of Chapter 3 concludes examines the final central research theme of social agency and how it is conceptualized by a number of theorists. I conclude with a discussion on what writers have to say about hip hop and social agency.

Chapters 4 and 5 explain the research methodology. In Chapter 4, I situate the research in an interpretive epistemology and explain why I chose to pursue a qualitative research design. I then explain my use of case study methodology. I conclude by describing the research site and profiling the research participants. Specifically I detail how the participants were recruited for the focus group and individual interviews. As well I describe the three hip hop venues at *Mosaic High* (*Speak*, the *Mosaic High Dance Team* & *Access Denied*), including the particular participants directly connected with each site. I conclude by discussing where additional data from other one-on-one interviews were collected.

Chapter 5 explains the fieldwork portion of the research by describing the data collection strategies of individual interviews, focus group interviews, observations and artefact collections. I conclude with thoughts on data analysis, interpretation and verification. Chapters 6 and 7 centre on data presentation, analysis and interpretation. In Chapter 6 I interpret the research participants' perspectives on race, identity and hip hop. Specifically, I look at how they understand how racial identities operate in hip hop and at their school. In Chapter 7, I conclude on the students' understanding of identity, social agency and hip hop. I examine how they enact alternate identities in their hip hop influenced venues at *Mosaic High*.

The research concludes with Chapter 8, in which I discuss results, as well as my reflections and recommendations.

1.3. *Ghetto Superstar*: Moving from the Margins to the Centre

"Ghetto Superstar" was a big hip hop hit in 1998 featuring American rappers Pras and Ol' Dirty Bastard, as well as Mya on backup vocals. In the music video, a white politician's prosthetic face is ripped off to reveal the black rapper Pras. Prior to Obama's presidency, this music video satirizes the notion that there could never be a black president. The song was featured on the soundtrack to the political satire, Bulworth, a movie about a politician who connects with black voters and the hip hop culture. The movie, song and accompanying video are all about flipping the dominant cultural order upside down. Whereas the word "ghetto" tends to suggest an undesirable, uncivilized, violent, poverty stricken, drug infested and black populated urban region, the oxymoronic "Ghetto Superstar" is an affirmation that even the most marginalized people can rise to the top.

I conclude my introduction here by reflecting on my own experiences of being a new immigrant to Canada trying to negotiate the complex expectations of a dominant culture. Specifically, I will also focus on what it means to a marginalized student who enters an education system and learns a curriculum that does not speak authentically to his identity.

During the aftermath of the Vietnam War, as my parents re-evaluated their place and purpose after the fall of Saigon in a new Ho Chi Minh City, they realized that it was not a place they wanted to raise their three young children. So they sold their prospering hair salon business, paid the hefty government duties, bid their farewells to family and friends, and embarked on a journey to a new land they believed would bring their children opportunities and happiness not possible in their homeland. As they made the harrowing boat trip with other refugees, they encountered atrocities and endured unimaginable injustices. Yet they were resolved in their decision when they looked into their children's eyes. They held onto their faith, as they awaited sponsorship in an unsanitary Indonesian refugee camp, cramped among the sea of people hoping for the same. My father reminisces about how Switzerland, Hong Kong, France and the United States all offered us a new home. He proudly remembers rejecting these offers because he was holding out for Canada, a place he heard would embrace people from developing parts of the world and provide the best formal education for his children. When ten church families from a small fishing town in Campbell River opened their hearts and wallets to our cause, my family and I found ourselves in a new land that while opening its door with one hand, closed it with the other.

We arrived in a land where people did not speak our language, understand our culture nor celebrate our traditions. They did not seem to want to understand our ways; they were more concerned that we learn *their* ways. This message was most apparent and reinforced in our formal Canadian schooling. Inside and outside the school, I did not possess the same social, economic, political nor cultural capital of my white peers, some of whom took advantage of their privilege with their racist taunts and acts. My sisters and I had to navigate through the hallways, the curricula and education system that did not reflect who we were and what we brought to school. I was educated predominantly in a system that positioned me as an outsider. I struggled to learn by myself both the implicit and explicit rules of power in the institution of education (Delpit, 1988). Greene (1993) writes about the detrimental effects of this delegitimization of the self in education and the implications for students:

> If the human being is demeaned, if her or his family is delegitimized, crucial rights are being trampled on. This is partly because persons marked as unworthy are unlikely to feel good enough to pose the

questions in which learning begins, unlikely to experience whatever curriculum is presented as relevant to their being in the world. (p. 212)

I quickly discovered that if I failed to comprehend the complex dominant sociocultural and political subtleties and nuances *naturally* understood by my white peers, I would continue to be made the *other*, shut out of full participation inside and outside of the school walls.

When I conceptualize the process of "othering" in the curriculum, I do not envision developing a curriculum that continues to exclude, isolate, alienate or marginalize those already outside of the dominant culture. Rather, my understanding of "othering" in the curriculum is to consciously and critically approach, conceptualize, design and develop curriculum from perspectives *other* than just perpetuating the privilege of the dominant culture. The word *other*, in this context of "othering," is a reclaiming of the traditionally exclusionary connotation and reinterpreting it in an inclusionary way in regards to curriculum development. An "other" curriculum values "an appreciation that 'other minds' can share their own different beliefs and theories," (Rinaldi, 2006, p. 205). Thus, it is essential that traditionally marginalized voices not only actively participate in the developing of an "other" curriculum, but most importantly, they strive to re-design curriculum that addresses the unique needs of the ever changing and diverse student population outside the mainstream cultural school group. Ball and Pence (2006), in their writing on Indigenous Education, describe a meaningful curriculum as one "that affirms students' identities and experiences; and classroom processes that empower students to be self-directed" (p. 48). Thus, it is imperative to have the student voices in this research play an important role in bringing about change to their learning environments and conditions.

What an "other" curriculum is *not*, however, is a Eurocentric dominated perspective of seeing the world, where other perspectives outside the perceived European norms are marginalized, trivialized and/or delegitimized. Supporters of a Eurocentric curriculum,

> maintain a monological interpretation of culture and, as such, advocate a curricular approach that is deeply informed by several ideological assumptions. First, curricular monologists conceptualize culture and

identity as consisting of a clearly demarcated set of lived and commodified cultural forms and practices specific to particular groups. These practices are defined as forms of property and are seen as constituting the totality of group capacity and definition. Second, mainstream theorists motivated by the manipulation of this model of culture and identity propose that curriculum reform should take the form of content addition to the dominant Eurocentric core curriculum, adding selectively from the stock of knowledge and experiences associated with minority groups. Third, monologists suggest that only the members of a given minority group are fully competent to understand the knowledge and the experiences pertinent to that particular group. (McCarthy, Giardina, Harewood & Park, 2003, p. 7)

Dominant cultural crusaders such as Ravitch (2002) and Hirsch (1991), in their plea for educators to return to "core" curricular content, not only see curriculum through these monological lenses, but also fail to problematize how such limited vision on curriculum development and implementation will detrimentally affect those who are outside the Eurocentric curriculum's pedagogical reach. In her defensive response to those who want to shake up the curriculum a little too much for her privileged taste, Ravitch rhetorically asks, "Should we allow our cultural heritage to be hijacked by a handful of self-righteous pedagogical sensors?" (p. 7). This exclusionary way of envisioning curriculum harmfully affects students whose experiences, backgrounds, cultures, etc. are absent from the exclusive European canon.

An "other" curriculum is, however, similar to what Boler (2001) calls "affirmative action pedagogy," which she describes as,

a pedagogy that ensures critical analysis within higher education classrooms of any expression of racism, homophobia, anti-Semitism, or sexism, for example. An affirmative action pedagogy seeks to ensure that we bear witness to marginalized voices in our classrooms, even at the minor cost of limiting dominant voices. (p. 321)

Even though Boler speaks from a post secondary perspective, the ideals of her "affirmative action pedagogy" can certainly apply to the re-conceptualization of a secondary school curriculum. Boler identifies the classroom setting as one of the very few public arenas where marginalized voices "can respond and be heard" (p. 322). An "other" curriculum challenges "the centralizing and regulatory role of textbook adoptions, patterns of textual representation, function of standardized testing, and use of

predetermined curricular packages" (Buras, 1999, p. 6) that continue to silence student voices. An "other" curriculum recognizes "the savagery, the brutal marginalizations, the structured silences, the imposed invisibility so present all around" (Greene, 1993, p. 211). In other words, an "other" curriculum strives to create more room and opportunities for students who have been traditionally shut out of the dominant discourse a chance to engage actively and directly with classroom learning that is pedagogically sensitive, culturally relevant and socially just.

It is my hope that by pursuing a study to understand how students engage with and make meaning of hip hop in their informal curriculum, I will be able to learn how the Secondary Language Arts curriculum can speak more meaningfully to the student I was and more importantly, to the students I teach.

2.   *What's the dillio?*: Popular Culture / Pedagogy, Race and Hip Hop

The phrase, "What's the dillio" is an "old skool" hip hop term meaning, "what's the deal" "what's up," "what's going on" or "what's happening." Essentially, the phrase is used to gain information about the most important aspects of something.

This first of two literature review chapters outlines the theoretical framework that grounds my research, methodology, data analysis and interpretation. This chapter is divided into two central themes: (a) popular culture and pedagogy theory, and (b) race theory. Each theme is also explored as it intersects with hip hop discourses.

In the first section, I focus on the role of popular culture and its relevance in education. In particular, I reference theorists such as Ibrahim (2004), McLaren (2003), Giroux (1996) and Apple (1993) who argue that pedagogical possibilities can be found in the popular culture of youth in schools. This leads to the examination of the phenomenon of hip hop in current popular culture. Referencing the studies of Chang (2013), Terkourafi (2010), Abdullah (2006), Dimitriadis (2001) and others, I trace the development of hip hop from its origins as a means for marginalized blacks to voice their discontent over the social injustices they face to the more commercially driven hip hop of today.

In the second section, I examine theories focusing on race from a contemporary sociocultural perspective, with an emphasis on researchers who speak to pedagogy, such as Ghosh and Abdi (2004), James (2003), Yon (2000) and Dei (1996). In framing race as a social construct shaped by authority, I discuss issues of power, privilege, classification, normalization and marginalization. The works of Foucault (1997) and Bakhtin (1981) help in shaping some of these fundamental concepts around race. This is followed by a closer analysis of how race operates in hip hop discourse. Here, I

reference Low (2011), Terkourafi (2010), Abdullah (2006), and Dimitriadis' (2001) work, chronicling how the development of hip hop was and continues to be intimately interconnected with, influenced by and responsive to race discourses.

2.1. *Throwback 1*:
Retrospective Reflection on Student Exchange

"Throwback" is urban vernacular referencing something from the past. This reminiscence is usually prompted by something in the present that stirs retrospection as well as introspection in an individual. The various "throwbacks" throughout this chapter as well as the following chapter, help to introduce and ground the theories that will be discussed as they interconnect with my history and lived experiences.

"Yo homie, sup?" These foreign words greeted my ears as I wandered through the over-crowded halls of Therrell High School in the Fulton County of Atlanta, Georgia. I navigated through the corridors of colourfully adorned students wearing MC Hammer style baggy pants, over-sized Atlanta Hawks jerseys and Fresh Prince of Bel-Air neon high top sneakers and backward caps. I am drawn to the addictive beats and bass of LL Cool J's "Mama Said Knock You Out" pumping out of a ghetto blaster as a group of students break dance in the centre of a make-shift stage formed by a small crowd of cheering peers. As well, the acapella crooning of Boyz II Men's "Motown Philly" and the rapping of Public Enemy's "Fight the Power" permeated through this urban school and black youth culture that were all new to me.

2.2. *Dats So Mainstream*:
Popular Culture and Pedagogy Theory

"Dats so mainstream" communicates the idea that something or someone has become too popular or over-saturated within the general public consciousness. The first cross-over hip hop song to make a significant impact on American white radio stations was the smash hit "Rapper's Delight" by the Sugarhill Gang in the 1970s. Connoisseurs of hip hop often distinguish underground hip hop, which is less accessible and less

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marketable, from mainstream hip hop, which is more commercial and appeals to a broader demographic group.

McLaren (2003) points out that there is a tendency to dichotomize culture into high and low forms, the former for the traditional academic *elites* while the latter for the *uneducated* masses (p. 214). Bekerman (2008) argues that this binary falsely implies that those well versed in the world of popular culture are there because they lack the intellectual rigour required in an educated culture. However, Farber, Provenzo and Holm (1994) are adamant that educational stakeholders, from students, teachers and administrators, to policymakers and parents must understand that modern day schooling "is conditioned by sociocultural context in which schooling is understood, a context that is in turn mediated by powerful forms of popular culture" (p. 1). Therefore, argues Hanley (2008), studying popular culture in formal school curricula will help educators to better understand the extent to which popular cultural discourses impact student consciousness.

There seems to be two predominant views in regards to popular culture and education. On one side are more traditional educators who frown upon the world of popular culture and see their classrooms as a sanctuary from the corrupt influences of mass media. On the other side are more progressive educators who recognize that students are already intimately connected to the world of popular culture and thus schools need to incorporate it into the curriculum. Within this latter group, there is also another divide. Some teachers draw on popular culture and incorporate it in their classroom as a way to engage their students but they do not necessarily help their students scrutinize and problematize the more contentious aspects of it. Other teachers believe that it is important to assist their students in critically recognizing popular culture's illusory trappings, as well as attempt to understand why young people are so drawn to it in the first place. My research is aligned with this latter perspective on popular culture and pedagogy. I focus on hip hop because it is currently the most popular musical form for many young people. As well, I am curious about the untapped pedagogical possibilities in hip hop and how understanding students' engagement with it can help to revision the Secondary Language Arts curriculum in a way that speaks more meaningfully to the students' learning. In this section of the chapter, I attend to theorists who examine intersections of scholarship on popular culture and pedagogy. In particular,

I look at how they conceptualize students' experiences inside and outside the school as a way to encourage more critical thought and social consciousness in young people.

Critical pedagogy theorists Giroux (1996) and Apple (1993) are two prominent scholars who work on issues related to popular culture and education. Apple argues that "Popular culture is one of the most important sites where the construction of our everyday lives can be examined" (p. 5). Both Giroux and Apple advocate for education that is informed and influenced by popular culture because they believe that school curricula must meaningfully reflect the immediate experiences and everyday realities of the students they are supposed to serve. Simply put, they suggest that when curricula are relevant, contemporary and engaging, more meaningful learning will occur. Apple and Giroux also highlight the need to move beyond examining and reflecting on the formal curriculum, but consider also the informal curriculum of students outside the classroom, away from textbooks and removed from standardized tests. They argue that the formal curriculum, or what Apple terms the often unquestioned "official knowledge," must be recognized as preferred, normalized and standardized over other forms of knowledge.

Birchall (2006) devotes much of her analysis of popular culture to emphasizing that it is based on knowledge that is worthy of academic pursuit. Like Giroux (1996) and Apple (1993), she argues that knowledge deriving from popular culture cannot be dismissed readily nor treated with distain. Birchall calls *marginalized knowledge* those forms of knowing considered unworthy, illegitimate and unofficial, which she contends provide insights into sociocultural processes:

> the emphasis in cultural studies on those knowledges produced by historically "marginalized" or disenfranchised groups (whether through their race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity and so on) have produced valuable contributions to our understanding of the relationship between knowledge, identity, and nationhood. (p. 18)

Birchall sees education as an arena in which the process of legitimizing forms of *marginalized knowledge* can occur. She argues that "Work in education (particularly the sociology of curriculum) is concerned not only with a democratic ideal of education (how to empower via knowledge transmission) but the idea that power resides in the authority

to dictate what knowledge is" (p. 15). Educators must ask, what is considered credible knowledge in the first place? Who gets to decide what is worthy of being taught in the classroom, as well as what is being excluded from the formal curriculum?

Holtzman (2000) also sees the value of extracting knowledge from the world of popular culture because she argues that some youth who are immersed in this world tend to disengage from critical thought. In her study, Holtzman analyzes how popular film, television and music teach young people about race, class, gender and sexual orientation. She advocates for a need to examine critically the world of popular culture, regardless of how superficial it may seem:

> What is challenging about identifying the signs and reflection of dominant culture in popular media is that most of us have been so thoroughly immersed in popular culture that its messages and values seem "normal" to us as well. We are looking to be entertained primarily, not to analyze the way we are being socialized. (p. 212)

Rather than using popular culture to simply hook students into curricula materials, which traditionally has been the case in education, Callahan (2004) proposes a constructivist approach to critical pedagogy where students and teachers help each other as "co-investigators of culture" (p. 52). More often than not, students' knowledge of popular culture is broader than their teachers' understanding of it, which leads some educators to shy away from it, argues Callahan. However, as Callahan suggests, because students feel a sense of competence and passion for the world of popular culture, their interest in the topic can act as a "catalyst for complex thinking" (p. 55).

Ibrahim (2004) also sees popular culture as not only a place where youth are socialized and construct identities related specifically to race and gender, but also as a place where their imagined concepts of self can be envisioned and explored. Ibrahim's interest in the intersection of popular culture and pedagogy leads him to ask a number of critical questions. He is concerned that even though youth identities have been shown to be influenced by popular culture, formal education often devalues popular culture's impact and worth, which leads him to wonder about the implications this has for the youth who like this art form. Furthermore, Ibrahim is not only interested in young people's consumption of popular culture, he is also curious about their production of it.

Writings on popular culture and curriculum more often speak to the consumption rather than the production of it. Ibrahim sees both of them as equally important for understanding how youth engage with identity construction. Thus he asks, "how can critical educators bring student-based and student-produced knowledge into the classroom, not to be consumed but rather to be critically engaged, deconstructed?" (p. 116). He suggests that educators need to walk a fine line between legitimizing students' experiences with popular culture while at the same time helping them to be critical about their engagement with it. For example, Ibrahim argues that hip hop is a youth cultural space embodying problematic dominant cultural discourses as well as "functioning as a subterranean subversion" (p. 118). Chavez and Soep (2005), in their study of how youth engage with popular media, would agree with Ibrahim about the importance of understanding what young people produce from their engagement and relationship with popular culture:

> We must know something about how young people are creating media in their own personal spaces and peer groups, often outside the awareness of adults, and in some cases against the wishes of their parents. (pp. 417-418)

Whether it be through their production of music beats, rap lyrics or dance choreography, much can be learned about how young people engage with popular culture.

2.3. *Afrika Bambaataa*: Hip Hop Theory

Afrika Bambaataa, one of the original Bronx DJs, is respectfully known in the black music community as the "Grandfather" of hip hop because he was instrumental in developing the hip hop movement and has extensive experience with this urban musical form. His vast knowledge of its development, growth and evolution makes him a hip hop historian, and thus the titling of this section pays homage to him through what the hip hop community would call a "shout-out." Here, the focus will be on illuminating the development of hip hop, from its "old skool" roots to its current place in mainstream popular consciousness.

The study of hip hop as credible academic inquiry has only gained scholarly support since the early 1990s (Sarkar, 2008). In fact, as Abdullah (2006) explains, "Hip Hop is often relegated as the faddish ranting of misguided urban youth by mainstream critics and academicians" (p. 465). Giroux (1996) is not impressed with hip hop because of what he sees as a promotion of violence, misogyny and general negativity in youth culture, which is why he advocates the need to study it. Not only is hip hop scholarship being recognized more by the academy, according to Petchauer (2007), it has also been enthusiastically embraced by education in the past decade. Ladson-Billings and Donnor (2005) not only state that there is a need for an academic treatment of hip hop, but they go as far as warning that scholars who ignore this sociocultural phenomenon are "out of touch and irrelevant to everyday lives of people engaged in social justice" (p. 294).

Hip hop first gained cultural popularity and notoriety in America, and still continues to attract a great following with its influence spreading across the world, where vibrant hip hop hubs can be found all over Europe, Asia, Australia – particularly in Germany, France and Japan (Bennett, 2001), and even in Quebec (Sarkar & Allen, 2007) and Toronto, Canada (Ibrahim 1999). Global hip hop trotter Terkourafi (2010), who was first introduced to hip hop in the city of Heraklion, Greece, compiled a collection of scholarly writings on hip hop from a German, French, Egyptian, Hungarian, Korean and Norwegian perspective. Here, I will define what constitutes hip hop music from a number of perspectives. Dimitriadis (2001) argues that phenomena from popular culture are never static nor "ahistorical," and that in order to understand a popular culture phenomenon, such as hip hop, we need to trace its development to fully appreciate its complexity. Dimitriadis adds that such an approach to examining hip hop enables us to better understand how issues around race, class, gender, identity and social activism are constructed in the production and consumption of hip hop texts and performances. This illumination allows for "opening up spaces for resistance and negotiation" (Dimitriadis, 2001, p. 12). Thus, the literature review that follows will also historically contextualize the hip hop movement, development and evolution to provide a clearer picture of how it has become the popular cultural phenomenon it is today.

Abdullah (2006) explains that at its core hip hop consists of three major components. First is rap music, which involves "MCing" and "DJing." "MCing" is a form of clever word playing, involving the use of techniques such as multisyllabic rhymes,

unconventional rhymes, internal rhymes, similes, metaphors and other figurative and literary devices. Rapping is commonly believed to have been imported from Jamaican immigrants living in New York urban areas in the 1970s. Essentially, "MCing" is another word for rapping. "DJing," or disc jockeying, is a person selecting and coordinating the music to be played to an audience. In hip hop, "DJing" often involves DJs using turntables to "scratch" beats to accompany the music being played. Clive "Hercules" Campbell, otherwise known as "Kool Herc," is credited for first experimenting with beats involving turntables, while Theodore "Grand Wizard" Livingstone serendipitously discovered "scratching," the art of creating sounds by rhythmically moving a vinyl record back and forth on a record player turntable.

Abdullah (2006) also adds that the music is complemented with breakdancing, also referred to as "Breaking" or "B-boying," which still continues to be a popular form of street dancing with today's youth. Breakdancing was originally created and developed in conjunction with the hip hop movement, but only became mainstream in the early 1980s. The connotation behind the word "breaking" suggests a style of dancing that encourages excitement, energy as well as "breaking" from the mode of traditional dance. The edgy, urban and acrobatic dance moves consist of a number of aggressive, aerial and contorting spins and poses to the beats of hip hop music. Rather than confined to traditional dance halls, the dancers, called "B-boys" and "B-girls," exhibited and performed their often spontaneous and improvised breakdancing routines on some of the meanest streets and sidewalks of New York and other major cities.

The third major component rounding out the hip hop trinity is graffiti. While "B-boying" encompasses the dance element and "MCing" and "DJing" provide the audio components, graffiti offers the visual representation of hip hop. Graffiti, also known as "tagging" and "aerosol art," is a form of urban visual expression that is often illegally plastered on public spaces, such as office buildings, park benches, street signs, bus shelters, and so on. It is believed that the earliest form of graffiti appeared in the 1960s in the form of black marker tagging by a teenager known as "Taki 183," who peppered his insignia throughout New York. But during the next forty years, graffiti became more elaborate, taking the form of full sized murals with intricate and colourful letterings and urban inspired images. Even though graffiti has gained some credibility within the art world, it continues to proudly maintain its outlaw art status. The artwork appears often

defiantly on public spaces for public consumption. Similar to the way "DJs" and "MCs," and "B-boys" and "B-girls" find public spaces to showcase their music and dance, graffiti artists who are often marginalized from the traditional art galleries, find their canvases on public walls.

White and Cones III (1999) further explain that the word hip hop has a number of connotations: "hip" is an African idiom suggesting something that is wise, urban and sophisticated, while "hop" refers to the dance element. Hip hop dance is about "B-boys and B-girls who practice 'pop' or 'lock', a style of dance that emphasizes quick jagged movements of their joints. However fluidity is conserved because each snapping joint occurs one after the other along the body's natural line" (Bruce & Davis, 2000, p. 123). Many other elements and individuals contributed to its formation; some of these influences are briefly summarized by Ramsey (2003):

> Its [hip hop] stylistic and thematic predecessors are numerous: the dozens and toasting traditions from America and Jamaica; sing-song children's games; double-dutch chants; black vernacular preaching styles; the jazz vocalese of King Pleasure, Eddie Jefferson, and Oscar Brown, Jr.; the on-the-air verbal virtuosity of black DJs; scat singing; courtship rituals; the lovers' raps of Isaac Hayes, Barry White, and Millie Jackson; the politicized storytelling of Gil Scott-Heron and the Last Poets; and the preacherly vocables of Ray Charles, James Brown, and George Clinton, among many others. Historians of rap music trace its present-day form, however, to the mid-1970s hip-hop culture of African American and AfroCaribbean youth living in the South Bronx and upper Manhattan neighborhoods of New York City. (pp. 165-166)

Hip hop is based on a spoken-word form of music that originally journeyed to America on the slave ships from West Africa and is rooted in the practices of traditional African *griots*, who were indigenous storytellers. As it flourished in the ghettos of urban American communities, hip hop was originally intended to offer people a platform to express their grief, anxiety, fear, anger and even hope despite a history of slavery and social, cultural, economic and political oppressions.

In the 1970s, the New York Bronx attracted Puerto Ricans, Jamaicans, Dominicans and black Americans. Holtzman (2000) explains that hip hop was a reaction to the post-industrial decline of the U.S. urban centres, where unemployment and

poverty were high. Fuelled by youthful angst and a will for political and social activism, Holtzman describes hip hop as

> a musical declaration of pride and identity amid urban poverty and alienation…. In its earliest form and in some of its contemporary incarnations, hip-hop and rap were political protest. Cultural studies scholars analyze political forms of rap as a popular and original form of music that has challenged and resisted the dominant culture. (pp. 243-44)

Ramsey (2003) adds,

> Disenfranchised youth created fashions, language, and musical and bodily performance styles and formed elaborate networks of posses (or crews) that expressed their local identities and affiliations through these modalities. (p. 165)

Essentially, hip hop offered black youth with a form of expression in which to construct the self in the face of under-representation, misrepresentation or no-representation at all in mainstream media. In conjunction with graffiti art and break dancing, hip hop, argues Holtzman (2000), is about showing off one's identity in the face of social oppression.

Hip hop's emancipatory quality inspired the Slam Poetry movement in the mid-1980s in Green Mill Tavern in Chicago. Mirroring the emphasis on provocative lyrics closely associated with hip hop as well as the *griots*, Slam Poetry is a "spoken word" art form born in the open mic café setting of urban neighbourhoods. Language Arts educators Bruce and Davis (2000) describe Slam Poetry as a means of making poetry accessible, relevant and meaningful for otherwise "eye-rolling" and sceptical teenagers reluctant to engage with poetry. But more important, argue Bruce and Davis, is Slam Poetry's ability to allow students to vent their frustration, anger and violence through the spoken word art form, rather than through other more destructive means. Gehring (2005) adds that similar to traditional hip hop, Slam Poetry is a marginalized art form serving marginalized people: "It's a home to the bohemian white kid who bemoans suburban life; the black kid from the inner city sick of gang killings; the Latina paying respect to a mother who earns a living scrubbing other people's floors; the Asian teen struggling with sexual identity" (p. 1).

Like Slam Poetry, earlier forms of hip hop were also considered phenomena from the fringe. However, as previously mentioned, the first mainstream commercial success for hip hop music began with the 1979 smash hit, "Rapper's Delight" by the Sugarhill Gang. Sylvia Robinson, a recording artist and producer, discovered the three founding members of the Sugarhill Gang, and was instrumental in getting the song recorded, released and distributed to the mainstream white listening public. Not only was the single a success within the black community, white music consumers also gravitated to this new sound in droves. This cross-over hit would soon usher in hip hop sound on mainstream American radio and it continues to dominate air play, Billboard music charts and album sales to this day (Abdullah, 2006).

Following the path to the mainstream music buying market paved by the Sugarhill Gang was the most successful hip hop/rap group of the early 1980s, Run-D.M.C. This group was the first hip hop act to appear on both MTV and on the cover of *Rolling Stones Magazine*, as well as land a major corporate endorsement deal with Adidas. Run-D.M.C.'s success was also tied to the changing musical landscape of hip hop in the eighties, when in-studio production became more important than live stage performances. The creation of Def Jam Recordings by Rick Rubin and Russell Simmons during this period also played a significant role in mass marketing hip hop as a brand, by focusing on the artist's image first and the music second. In fact, argues Dimitriadis (2001), the selling of hip hop icons to the masses was at the top of the industry's agenda. In order to make hip hop and rap more accessible to the general music consuming public, producers such as Rubin and Russell fashioned songs that were radio friendly, borrowing from pop music's formula for crafting tunes with wider appeal. For example, Dimitriadis explains that unlike the Sugarhill Gang's "Rapper's Delight" track that clocked in at over fourteen minutes in duration, songs produced during this period tended to range from three to four minutes on average. This was possible through a more streamlined and structured way of composing songs that were organized in more manageable verses and choruses focusing generally on one central theme. Gone were the days when hip hop tracks could be spontaneous, improvisational and multi-themed if they wanted to appeal to popular radio stations and the public.

Dimitriadis (2001) continues to explain that part of this mass marketing of hip hop meant that the music was no longer place-dependent in specific urban locales

throughout the United Sates, but rather morphed itself into "mobile" music that transcended city, state and even country borders. Hip hop was becoming more of a commodity that could be experienced throughout suburbia, finding its place in portable boom boxes and Walkmans, on car radios and in the comfort of one's home. Dimitriadis argues that because hip hop was becoming more and more borderless throughout the mid- and late-1980s, a black nationalist identity began to emerge on the East Coast and rapidly spread westward with the music: "Rap became, in short, an idiom that could create solidarities beyond the boundaries of face-to-face communication" (p. 27). Hip hop acts such as Public Enemy preached through their rap about a black solidarity and a formation of an African American Nation that appealed to and resonated with youth throughout the whole country.

Meanwhile on the West Coast, another hip hop movement called Gangsta Rap began to occupy the popular consciousness of youth, much to the chagrin of politicians, law enforcement officers and educators. Dimitriadis (2001) defines Gangsta Rap as a hyperbolic version of hip hop in which there exists larger-than-life figures who glorify an exaggerated form of violence and brutality. What sets this genre of hip hop apart from its predecessors as well as its counterpart on the East Coast is the fact that it embraces the concept of "rap as ghetto reporter" (Dimitriadis, p. 28). Dimitriadis distinguishes Gangsta Rap from other forms of hip hop by its roving narrative-based approach to music in which characters, plots and messages play instrumental roles in reporting, informing and educating young listeners to the realities, violence and injustices of "ghetto life" without censorship. Notable Gangsta Rappers during the 1980s such as N.W.A., Ice Cube, Ice-T, Dr. Dre and Snoop Doggy Dogg tackled difficult subject matters at the heart of black oppression with a belligerent attitude, using graphic and explicitly violent images and words to communicate their frustration, fury and hatred for the hegemonic institutions and figures who continued to imprison blacks in the ghettos of America's poorest neighbourhoods. Gangsta Rap was about confronting the harsh reality of American urban life by countering it with an even "tougher," over-the-top-masculine front, which according to Dimitriadis, contributed to the further marginalization of women from hip hop. As men assumed the production, distribution and performance of Gangsta Rap, Dimitriadis argues that "Rap began to be constructed as a more masculinist art form during this period, one that both largely denied opportunities for female access and

opened a space for the proliferation of already existing and deeply misogynist cultural discourses" (p. 24). Women became merely decorative pieces in music videos and targets of violence, sexism and misogyny in lyrics.

What helped to further spread the popularity of Gangsta Rap to youth throughout the United States as well as Canada, Europe, Asia and other regions around the world were the provocative music videos in constant rotation on MTV as well as in popular urban themed films such as the early 1990s movie blockbuster *Boyz in the Hood*. Furthermore, Dimitriadis (2001) explains that much of Gangsta Rap's appeal is also credited to the autobiographical nature of music produced by notable artists in the 1990s such as Tupac and Biggie Smalls, who wove their personal tribulations into their music as a way for their fans to connect with them on a more intimate level, ultimately yielding more profitable returns. Dimitriadis posits that the glorification of gang life and gang affiliation in their music and videos appeals to youth who often feel powerless in their own lives. This kind of graphic and violent hip hop continued to be embraced and celebrated well into the 1990s by controversial artists such as Method Man, Nas, Redman and Jay-Z who insisted on pushing the envelope of "public decency" and challenging TV network and radio censors.

However, the hip hop of yesteryears, predominantly fuelled by its political and social agenda for change, is not the hip hop many of the students are necessarily listening to and engaging with today. In its current popular cultural form, much of contemporary hip hop contradicts many of the core values of social progress advocated by its predecessors, which has left it vulnerable to criticisms. Although some contemporary hip hop artists continue to write, produce and sing socially conscious songs, at the root of the music, much of the contemporary hip hop has evolved more into a predominantly money-making venture than a liberating venue for creating social change for disenfranchised peoples. Critics of hip hop, such as Giroux (1996) and hooks (1994), point to popular hip hop artists producing commercially successful recordings by spouting violent, misogynistic, homophobic, sexually explicit and even racist lyrics aimed at a predominantly young, male demographic.

Lyrics from many of today's top selling hip hop artists tend to endorse and glorify "Gangsta" violence, excessive materialism, brutality against law enforcement, vandalism,

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riots, murder, drug use, objectification of "bitches, ho's and skanks" and hatred of "fags."

McBride (2007) elaborates on the saturation and impact of commercialization in today's

hip hop music:

> Most rap songs unabashedly function as walking advertisements for luxury cars, designer clothes, and liquor. Agenda Inc., a "pop culture brand strategy agency" listed Mercedes-Benz as the number one brand mentioned in Billboard's top 20 singles of 2005. Hip-hop sells so much Hennessy cognac, listed at number six, that the French makers, deader than yesterday's beer a decade ago, are now rolling in the suds. The company even sponsored a contest to win a visit to its plant in France with a famous rapper. (p. 114)

The underlying message from many of these commercially driven hip hop artists is the more "bling bling" you have, the more "bitches" you'll get. What has parents, politicians, religious leaders and purists of hip hop music most troubled is the blatantly unapologetic boasting of misogynistic rappers flaunting their sexual conquests and making a lot of money selling this message to impressionable youth. A number of politicians and advocacy groups have waged war on the hip hop community, pointing to it as contributing to the crumbling of society's moral standards (Parmar & Bain, 2007; Petchauer, 2007; Abdullah, 2006; Ladson-Billings & Donnor, 2005; Dimitriadis, 2001; Ibrahim, 1999; McLaren, 1997).

Hikes (2004) is one of hip hop's most vocal critics, arguing that current hip hop is responsible for "driving respect for Black culture to an all-time low" (p. 40). He is particularly concerned with hip hop's distortion of race and gender and the resulting implications and impact on young black boys and girls:

> The ultimate tragedy of this paradigm is that young children who do not have the cognitive ability to differentiate between illusion and reality are continually exposed to a genre of "entertainment" that serves as the predominant and prevailing expression of African American culture. For non-Black children, it creates gross misrepresentations of the Black experience. But its impact is exceedingly worse for Black children, particularly for young Black girls whose self-worth and self-esteem are frequently being shaped by these unrealistic and harmful images of Black womanhood. (p. 40)

For example, one of the biggest hip hop singles of 2006 was Akon and Snoop Doggy Dogg's sexual anthem, "I Wanna Fuck You." The song is a conversation of sorts between a patron of an exotic dance club and a dancer, who has no actual voice in this sexually charged "dialogue." The dancer, referred to as a "pussy," entertains the patron by "grinding up on that pole" and "rubbing [her] back and touching [her] neck," as well as other even more sexually explicit manoeuvres while the patron raps about his sexual fantasy: "If you pick me then I'mma [sic] pick on you, d-o-double g and I'm here to put this dick on you." The woman in this song plays only one role, which is to sexually pleasure and satisfy the man's fantasies and needs. No equitable reciprocity is evident in the relationship between these two players. Although there are many more songs of this nature racing up the music charts, what is even more disturbing is that this song is a relatively "tamed" version compared to many other more explicit hip hop songs blasting through the earphones of iPods that youngsters wear these days.

Since many students are consuming the disturbing content from contemporary commercial hip hop, how should educators respond to its growing popularity? Some believe this musical trend is only a fad that will eventually lose momentum. Others suggest we censor or simply ban this kind of hip hop music. Gustafson (2008), whose study on how American music educators tend to regard hip hop as unsuitable for the formal curriculum, acknowledges the challenge of justifying it to parents, teachers and administrators, particularly in light of the way traditional "white music" has been deemed the standard against which all forms of music are to be evaluated. Gustafson argues that a different approach to curriculum is necessary to not only address the more diverse student population's varying music tastes, but to also dismantle the problematic notion that music rooted in white traditions solely constitutes "real music." Before condemning hip hop without careful and critical consideration, Baldwin (2004) argues that the critique of hip hop as "infecting the morals and family values of suburban teens," (p. 159) must be contextualized and understood in the "ideological and material spaces of colonialism [and] racism" (p. 159).

Unlike many mainstream right wing conservative and religious groups that have been vocal about an outright ban of hip hop without further and closer investigation of its appeal to young people, a number of scholars advocate the need for a critical unpacking of the complexities, nuances and contradictions behind the controversy around hip hop.

This closer analysis of hip hop may then offer a holistic critique of how and why much of this music today has degenerated to its current contentious state. Although some see no pedagogical value in the study of hip hop, the reality is that many young people are listening to the music regardless, often without any critical thought as to what they are listening to. Authors such as Ladson-Billings (2005) and hooks (1994), for example, adopt a pedagogical lens to scrutinize hip hop. They recognize and honour the value and worth of this music, while also respectfully critiquing and problematizing some of hip hop's more contentious elements. These scholars show how contemporary hip hop has not completely severed its ties with the transformative and emancipatory roots of its predecessors.

2.4. *Throwback 2*:
Retrospective Reflection on the *Ja* Incident

"Ja" is a ham that is the centre piece of a traditional Vietnamese submarine sandwich. Ja also goes well with shrimp rice noodles. Ja is a staple that can be found in virtually any household in Vietnam. But Ja was very difficult to acquire in Canada, especially in a small predominantly white town on Vancouver Island, British Columbia. However, once a year, my parents' friends would make the long drive to Vancouver's Chinatown to pick up some Ja as well as a number of other ethnic ingredients not found at the local Campbell River Safeway. When the parcel of goods was delivered, my mother would sift through each and every coveted item, handling each product with nostalgia and great care. They were indeed prized possessions that were once taken for granted back home.

One of my fondest memories is gathering around the kitchen table and watching my father meticulously carve thin slices of Ja for each of his children. Because the Ja was only in the shape and size of a Campbell's chicken noodle soup can and had to satisfy our cravings until the next year, each morsel was savoured with great indulgence. Once we each were handed a slice of Ja, my father would carefully wrap the remaining chunk and store it for safe keeping in the refrigerator like a diamond covered in purple velvet cloth ready to be returned to the safe in the den wall, behind a generic painting.

The Ja would reappear in my lunch the next afternoon as I joined the other students to eat. The minute I opened my lunch bag, the aroma from the fish sauce marinated Ja greeted my broad smile and my wide opened mouth. However, the Ja caused my peers to squeeze their noses and wrinkle their faces in disgust as the scent of my lunch assaulted their appetites.

"What stinks?" whined one of my friends. Others chimed in. I couldn't smell anything. But I threw my lunch away and learned to eat peanut butter and jelly sandwiches instead.

This episode from my elementary school experience taught me at an early age that because of the colour of my skin and even the food I ate, I was different from the other students.

2.5. *In Living Color*: Race Theory

In the mid-1990s, a trailblazing and controversial comedy sketch show premiered on the Fox Network as a more black and more urban alternative to the popular and predominantly white influenced "Saturday Night Live." This innovative hip hop influenced show called "In Living Color" featured predominantly black comedians satirizing urban issues as well as hip hop dance sequences showcasing the iconic "Fly Girls" who were mostly young coloured women dancing to hip hop beats and music. Musical guests were the hot hip hop and rap artists of the time. The logo for the show featured graffiti inspired artwork while the theme song was a hip hop anthem rapped by Heavy D and the Boyz. The Wayan brothers, creators and stars of the show, tackled issues on race and racism head on, offering more colour TV for the general public.

Because current hip hop music often experiments with, re-shapes and re-defines notions of race in subtle, complex and sometimes contradictory and often controversial ways, I am curious about how young people listening to race rhetoric in hip hop music come to negotiate meaning and form their own understanding of ideas of race from the music they listen to. I hope to better understand the extent to which modern hip hop producers are responsible for illuminating, diluting, distorting and/or even presenting a particular representation of race for the young audience they target in their music.

The theoretical framework on race in my own research is predominantly informed by contemporary sociocultural theorists, particularly – although not exclusive to – those who write about race and education from a Canadian perspective, such as Ghosh and Abdi (2004), James (2003), Yon (2000), Dei (1996) and Ghosh (1996). For example Ghosh and Abdi explain that race "has no biological basic, and is essentially an ideology of power that stratifies people on the basis of biological and cultural characteristics" (p. 60), while Yon argues that we need to conceptualize race as a discursive process, meaning races are socially constructed by dominant cultural discourses. In the next section, I will examine a number of discourses on race that continue to influence some people's understanding of it. I will also discuss how current sociocultural theorists, particularly education researchers, have come to problematize, deconstruct and re-conceptualize notions of race.

Race is the "principle of classifying individuals into groups and differentiating them on the basis of predominantly physical attributes" (Fleras & Elliott, 2003, p. 3). Racism then, "consists of a coherent set of beliefs (ideology) that labels, classifies, evaluates, and discriminates against members of a group by virtue of their inclusion in a predefined and biologically based category" (p. 52). Watkins (2005) investigates earlier beliefs and practices of racism by looking at the religious impact of Puritanism on shaping understandings of race and the dominant morality in America. At the heart of Puritan ideology, argues Watkins, was the need to cleanse one's self and one's society of the overbearing temptation of sin and corruption. This crusade for social purification became the fundamental vision for the building of America, but such a pursuit resulted in an exclusionary practice that is central to how racist practice operates, according to Watkins:

> They [the Puritans] developed a theory of exclusion giving authorities the right to punish and expel. The exclusionary concept became oppressive on non-Puritans, such as Anglicans, who resided within Puritan communities. Thus the notion of an "other" was established in their social order. The "other" could easily be viewed as deviant. The ideological foundations for discrimination were thus deep within Puritan dogma. (pp. 177-178)

Similar to the Puritans, Arthur de Gobineau (1816-1882), a French "intellectual racist" according to Watkins (2005), linked notions of human virtue to bloodlines. Watkins

recounts how Gobineau studied the bloodlines of Aryans and concluded that the purity of their blood, "was responsible for the heroism and intellect in the Aryans" (p. 183). Gobineau argued that social moral decline was not the fault of misgovernment, but rather the mixing and tainting of bloods between different races. He posited that all civilizations were derived from the white race, formulating a racial hierarchy summarized here by Watkins:

> White people are characterized by "energetic intelligence," great physical power, stability, inclinations to self-preservation, and love of life and liberty. Their great weakness, according to Gobineau, was a susceptibility to cross-breeding. Asians were mediocre, lacked physical strength, and wished to live undisturbed. They could never create a viable civilization. Black people, the lowest of all, possessed energy and willpower but were unstable, unconcerned about the preservation of life, given to absolutes, and easily enslaved. (p. 184)

Carolus Linnaeus (1707-1778), a biological taxonomist, "found Whites to be innovative and of keen mind, whereas Blacks were lazy and careless" (cited in Watkins, 2005, p. 184). Skin colour – white, black, red and yellow – and personal characteristics were the criteria Linnaeus employed for his typology. Johann Friedrich Blumenbach (1752-1840), a physiologist and founder of modern anthropology, offered names for some of the skin colour groups. Blumenbach referred to whites as *Caucasian* because he believed they were as beautiful as the southern slopes of Mount Caucasus; blacks were assigned the derogatory term "oran-outangs" to align them with the world of chimpanzees and monkeys. Benjamin Rush (1745-1813), a medical doctor, added to the essentializing of blacks by deeming them pathologically infected people with "big lip, flat nose, wooly hair, and Black skin [that] were the characteristics of lepers" (cited in Watkins, 2005, p. 186)."

Although Foucault (1997) did not write specifically about race, a number of his theories about power are useful for understanding the discourse on race. For example, Foucault speaks about the obsession with classification scheming that Kant and his likes were so eager to embrace. In particular, Foucault's analysis of the function of the prison as a microcosm of the greater society's social control over its people illustrates how the prison utilizes classification schemes for assessing its prisoners:

> The prison became a sort of permanent observatory that made it possible to distribute the varieties of vice or weakness. From 1797, the prisoners

were divided into four classes: the first for those who were explicitly condemned to solitary confinement or who had committed serious offences in the prison; the second for those who were "well known as old offenders…whose depraved morality, dangerous character, irregular dispositions, or disorderly conduct" became apparent during the time they were in prison; the third for those "whose character and circumstances, before and after conviction, led one to believe that they were not habitual offenders;" the fourth and last was a special section, a probationary class for those whose character was still not known, or who, if they were better known, did not deserve to be put in the preceding category. (p. 126)

Foucault argues that the prison is an example of an obsession with meticulous documentation and record keeping by those in power. Detailing, rationalizing and objectifying allow those in power to use pseudo-scientific logic and ambiguous medical language such as "curing" social deviants, to ultimately justify social control and manipulation over their bodies, much like how Nazi doctors experimenting on their "deviant" Jewish "patients" were convinced they were remedying the ills of society, guised in a supposedly humane social agenda.

Foucault (1997) further argues that although it is important to show, demonstrate, condition and even coerce the masses into accepting, believing and acting according to the social norms established and maintained by those in power, it was regarded as even more important and advantageous to identify, detain and cure those who exist outside the realms of social norms. More specifically,

It [the art of punishing] refers individual actions to a whole that is at once a field of comparison, a space of differentiation and the principle of a rule to be followed. It differentiates individuals from one another, in terms of the following overall rule: that the rule be made to function as a minimal threshold, as an average to be respected or as an optimum towards which one must move. It measures in quantitative terms and hierarchizes in terms of value the abilities, the level, the "nature" of individuals. It introduces, through this "value-giving" measure, the constraint of a conformity that must be achieved. Lastly, it traces the limit that will define difference in relation to all other differences, the external frontier of the abnormal…. It [the disciplinary institution] compares, differentiates, hierarchizes, homogenizes, excludes. In short, it *normalizes*. (pp. 182-83)

There is an overwhelming fear of what Foucault refers to as "delinquents" or "delinquency." It is the delinquents who threaten the social order, social stability and social control who need to be *normalized*, however that might be defined by those in

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power. Being enslaved to the authority of power makes individuals more susceptible to what Foucault terms *docility*. Foucault explains that the body is viewed by those in power as something that could be "manipulated, shaped, trained, which obeys, responds, becomes skillful and increases its forces" (p. 136). The body is equivalent to the machine, something that could be built from scratch, repaired and tinkered with for optimal performance. Foucault equates this mechanical model of maintenance to the *disciplining* of the body: "Discipline 'makes' individuals; it is the specific technique of a power that regards individuals both as objects and as instruments of its exercise" (p. 170). Thus when the body is objectified through this process of disciplining, it becomes a tool for someone else's means, rendering it void of critical consciousness, or as Foucault terms it, *docile*.

Bakhtin (1981), like Foucault, does not write directly about race. However, his theory on the *authoritative discourse*, similar to Foucault's concept of *docility*, is also useful for understanding race. According to Bakhtin, people dictated by *authoritative discourses* are stripped of their fundamental right to govern themselves:

> The authoritative word demands that we acknowledge it, that we make it our own; it binds us, quite independent of any power it might have to persuade us internally; we encounter it with its authority already fused to it. The authoritative word is located in a distanced zone, organically connected with a past that is felt to be hierarchically higher. It is, so to speak, the word of the fathers. Its authority was already acknowledged in the past. It is a prior discourse…. It is not a free appropriation and assimilation of the world itself that authoritative discourse seeks to elicit from us; rather, it demands our unconditional allegiance. Therefore authoritative discourse permits no play with the context framing it, no play with its borders, no gradual and flexible transitions, no spontaneously creative stylizing variants on it. (pp. 342-43)

Authoritative discourses can take the form of government policies, medical expertise, legal jargon and even educational curricula. These imposing socio-cultural-economic-political forces are "the words of god," not to be questioned, critiqued nor challenged. Rather *authoritative discourses* serve only to preserve power, maintain tradition and perpetuate the social cycle of exclusivity.

Those within the exclusive dominant culture club are afforded taken-for-granted privileges such as prominent social status, advancements, resources, opportunities,

wealth – essentially power. Fleras and Elliott (2003) explain that power is acquired and sustained within the dominant cultural frame by coercing the most vulnerable people in society to comply with the hegemonic ideologies established by the dominant class. They describe the *dominant group* as predominantly composed of white, heterosexual, middle class, Christian, English speaking and able-bodied men. Members are characterized by their power and privilege to establish the norms and standards by which others outside the group are judged and evaluated. This privilege, according to McIntosh (1989), is often unquestioned and taken for granted by those belonging to the dominant group: "White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools and blank checks" (p. 10). Using a *knapsack* metaphor, McIntosh insists that individuals, especially those members of the dominant group, need to unpack their privileges in order to understand the social, economic and political power they hold over non-members.

Some contemporary sociocultural theorists study and discuss the function of normalization as a social construct in race discourse and how it operates to favour whites as the ideal, the neutral, the standard by which others are judged, the pure, the unadulterated, the revered, the original – essentially the *normal* – whereas those outside white are the deviant, the abnormal, the strange, the weird, the broken, the partial, the flawed, the backwards, the undesirable, the other – essentially the *abnormal* (hooks, 2004, 1994; Fleras & Elliott, 2003; Foley, 2003; James, 2003; Lorber, 2000; Windschitl & Joseph, 2000; Yon, 2000; Dei, 1996; Ghosh, 1996; Freire, 1993; Greene, 1993; McDermott, 1993; McIntosh, 1989). Thus, according to Brock (2003), norms are essentially "social rules and expectations that govern our behaviour in particular groups or situations; they tend to reflect and serve the interests of the dominant members of the groups in which they operate" (p. 333). Those not part of the dominant culture's conception of norms, who represent the majority in number, are often marginalized, ostracized and alienated from mainstream society and its wealth, resources, institutions, employment, education, housing, opportunities and other privileged social commodities. This dichotomy invariably fuels irrational justification for the misinterpretation and mistreatment of those outside the normative group:

> The goodness of White is always contrasted with the badness of Black – Blacks are involved with drugs; Blacks are unacceptable sexually; Black

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men attempt to invade White sexual space by talking to White women; Black women are simply filthy. This binary translated in ways that complemented White boys, as there is a virtual denial of anything at all good being associated with Blackness, and of anything bad being identified with Whiteness. (Fine, Weis & Powell, 1997, p. 257)

This mindset often leads to what Du Bois (1953) calls a "double consciousness," in which the non-dominant individual is constantly trying to see the world through a white lens. Non-dominant culture people are more likely to encounter various forms and degrees of racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, xenophobia, discrimination, prejudices, bias and other social injustices and oppressions.

hooks (2004, 1994), James (2003), Yon (2000), Dei (1996), Ghosh (1996), Freire (1993) and McIntosh (1989) also point out that those in the dominant culture are less likely to concede or even share their power and will do all they can to preserve it, even if it means contributing to further oppression. This can be done through overt and covert, and explicit and implicit means, on an individual and/or institutional level, that can lead to physical, emotional, psychological, sexual and other life lasting scars that strip away at the dignity and identity of those not fortunate enough to have won the birth lottery. Dei points out that it is important to understand that racism goes beyond a simple black-white polarity. Dei insists that whites must also be included in the dialogue because they too have been "racialized for power and privilege" (p. 52). Racism, according to Dei, is about de-legitimizing home and community cultures and isolating gender, class, sexual orientation issues, just to name a few parts of its complex makeup.

2.6. *Common Dream*: Hip Hop and Race

Current critically renowned and commercially successful rapper, Common, featuring the also popular rapper will.i.am, released a hip hop track titled "A Dream" in 2006. This song was also featured on the soundtrack to the educationally inspiring Freedom Writers, a movie based on real life teacher Erin Gruwell's remarkable work with at-risk inner city students. Using the popular technique of sampling, which is incorporating well-known audio excerpts into a new hip hop track, Common inserted

snippets of Martin Luther King Jr.'s iconic "I Have a Dream" speech throughout his song as both a tribute to the Civil Rights Movement leader as well as a reminder that blacks in America continue to face daily racism. Speaking for the voice of the common people, this hip hop artist raps, "I ride through the waves of the madness/ Struggle in my address/ Where pain and crack lives/ Gunshots coming from sounds of blackness..../ I fight the same fight that made Martin Luther the king."

When speaking about hip hop, there is no denying that the discourse of race is very much central to the music's roots as well as present in its contemporary form. Both Terkourafi (2010) and Chang (2005), who are hip hop historians, see race as inseparable from the discourse. Terkourafi writes that "references to Blackness, real or imagined are a recurring device by which homage is paid to the genre's Black roots," (p. 8) and Chang states that "the Hip-Hop Generation brings together time and race, place and polyculturalism, hot beats and hybridity" (p. 2). Hip hop emerged as a reaction to enslavement, social, economic and political injustices and outright racism. The subject of race was core to most traditional hip hop music and even though its presence is lesser to a certain degree in contemporary commercialized hip hop, the dialogue of race still reverberates through even mainstream radio-friendly hip hop hits.

Researchers and writers of hip hop's history point to race and racism as central to hip hop discourse as its beats, raps and dance moves are fundamental to its music (McBride, 2007; Parmar & Bain, 2007; Abdullah, 2006; Ladson-Billings & Donnor, 2005; Ibrahim 2004, 2004, 1999; Dimitriadis, 2001; White & Cones III, 1999; McLaren, 1997). Hip hop evolved out of the *griot* tradition as a way for the musical storytellers to cope with being violently ripped from their land, home, family and culture, only to be enslaved by the white man in the new land.

Hip hop, or any other musical form attached to black music writers and performers, encountered its share of racism from the mainstream white music industry. Holtzman (2000) explains how the emergence of popular Cover Music in the 1950s was shrouded in racism. Although white music executives admitted that music written by black artist was good, they were not as confident about a black performer being able to "front" the music to a white music-buying public. Thus, the practice of Cover Music, where white musicians "covered" music that was written and produced by black artists,

became a popular way of getting black music played on white radio stations. Covering Music was standard practice in the white dominated music industry, particularly from a managerial and executive perspective, until 1959, when Berry Gordy, an influential black music producer of the time, wanted to prove to sceptics in the music industry as well as the general music-buying public that black song writers and performers could be just as economically successful as their white counterparts. Gordy, countering the institutional racism within the music industry, founded and successfully marketed Motown Records, a recording company that produced and promoted black song writers and singers:

> Motown organization and sound and its wide appeal across racial lines gave a sense of hope and promise to blacks and whites who wanted integration. Here was a place where black and white people worked side by side to make and appreciate something together—music. In its organization, its recording artists, and in its audiences, the business and sound of Motown was the first major crossover phenomenon. (Holtzman, 2000, p. 243)

Despite a number of challenges and tensions within the record company, Motown was a microcosm of the racial integration that was beginning to take shape in the decades to follow.

But what was to follow in the next few decades were social conditions that were even more atrocious for black Americans under the Ford and Carter administrations in the 1970s (Abdullah, 2006). Political and economic instability led to high unemployment and crime rates, with blacks disproportionally represented. Abdullah argues that racism played a central role in mainstream white America's systemic and institutional disadvantaging of working class black Americans, as well as other members of communities of colour. During this period hip hop began to grow rapidly to counter the racist attitudes, actions, policies, etc. of the dominant white culture. Music, dance and graffiti became the weapons the hip hop culture used to combat the tools, mechanisms and institutions for maintaining white American prosperity in the light of black poverty and despair.

For his part, 1980s hip hop legend, L.L. Cool J "played the race card" in his own subversive way through his music. Dimitriadis (2001) explains that Cool J used his lyrics,

posturing and hip hop identity to confront and challenge the racial inequities of white America, sometimes for the better and sometimes for the worse:

> By noting that his competitors are "oreos," L.L. equates a lack of aggressive vocal prowess and presence with "whiteness." The implication is that being (metaphorically, of course) aggressive, violent, and "bad" would make one "authentically black." L.L. Cool J's image is thus tied into a kind of racialized macho posturing. Indeed, he embraced these ideals in full force, often posing shirtless to show off his muscular figure and often boasting of his boxing prowess. His second album, *Bigger and Deffer*, sports a photo of him working out on a heavy bag, complete with thick gold chains and Kango hate. This image – the violent and aggressive young black male – would lodge itself in the collective psyche of America and its perception of rap music, drawing as it did on decades of affectively invested, dominant cultural discourses and ideologies. (p. 24)

As Dimitriadis points out, the irony as well as the injustice is that even when L.L. Cool J. attempted to assert his "worth," "manhood" and "power" within the white discourse of race, he ultimately suffered the consequence of only reaffirming for the dominant culture just what a "monster" he and other black rappers are.

2.7. *Gimme the Low Down*: Chapter Summary

When one says, "Gimme the low down," one is essentially requesting the most essential details of a particular situation or asking someone to sum up something that is relatively complex or lengthy. This expression is also used when one wants to "get up to speed" with what has already transpired.

The purpose behind this chapter was to outline the central theories that helped to inform my research. These included theories on popular culture and pedagogy, and race. Within each grouping, I also grounded the theory in hip hop discourses by examining how they interconnect and how this intersection further informs my understanding.

I began the chapter by analyzing the academic and pedagogical merit of pursuing research in popular culture. Writers such as Ibrahim (2004), McLaren (2003),

Giroux (1996) and Apple (1993) argue that the pedagogical possibilities found in popular culture need to be investigated, even if on the surface the content may seem superficial. These theorists see the better understanding of the informal curriculum of youth's popular culture as necessary for informing the development of the formal curriculum. Sarkar (2008), Abdullah (2006) and Ladson-Billings and Donnor (2005) point to hip hop in particular as an area in popular culture that has recently gained academic interest as well as credibility, especially in the field of education. Next, I helped to define for the reader the core elements of "DJing," "MCing," "B-boying" and graffiti art making and their important roles in hip hop. The remainder of this section of the chapter traced hip hop back to its roots of emerging from the African *griots* and slave ships to its socio-cultural-economic-political origins in the black ghettos of New York. This was contrasted with hip hop's current commercially driven and at times sexually explicit, misogynistic and homophobic incarnation. Nevertheless, rather than simply dismissing hip hop, writers like Ladson-Billings (2005) and hooks (1994) still urge educators and researchers to see hip hop through critical lenses, but to do so from a holistic, contextual and pedagogical perspective.

The second section of this chapter concentrated on sociocultural and pedagogical understandings of race, first problematizing some of the "traditional" ways in which race is understood and justified. Here some of the early epistemologies of the conception and construction of race were unpacked. Next, Foucault's (1997) *docility* theory and Bakhtin's (1981) *authoritative discourse* were introduced to help better illustrate and understand how power structure operates in race. The section continued with a contemporary, Canadian and education perspective on race. Ghosh and Abdi (2004), James (2003), Yon (2000) and Dei (1996) discuss issues of privilege, classification, normalization and marginalization that are central to the understanding of race discourse. The final part of this section linked these understandings of race with the race discourse in hip hop. Terkourafi (2010), Abdullah (2006) and Dimitriadis (2001) argue that the discourse of race within the discourse of hip hop is intimately interconnected. From its history of enslavement to its marginalization on mainstream radio prior to the late-1970s as well as its emergence as a platform for black youth to express their frustration and anger over the discrimination and prejudices they

experience daily at the hands of white America, race is as integral to hip hop as its beats and samples.

In the next chapter, I continue with the second part of my literature review by focusing on the two remaining central themes: (a) identity theory, and (b) social agency theory – as well as their intersection with hip hop.

3.   *What's the 4-1-1?*:
Identity, Social Agency and
Hip Hop

The term "What's the 4-1-1?" was re-appropriated and popularized by the hip hop community to essentially mean, "Give me the information/ knowledge/ history/ context/ background story" on a particular topic or person. It is considered the "new skool" version of "What's the dillio?"

In the previous chapter, I began my literature review by examining theories of popular culture and pedagogy, and race, and their implications for the study of hip hop. Here I continue with the second part to my literature review by focusing on theories of identity and social agency. Similar to the previous chapter, I will also examine how these remaining themes intersect hip hop theory.

I begin this chapter with a brief retrospective narrative reflection on my personal experience with an undesired identity that was attributed to me, followed by a discussion of identity. Some of the key theorists whose work informs my understanding of identity include Holland and Lave (2001), Yon (2000), Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner and Cain (1998), Butler (1997), Hall (1996) and Hall, Held and McGrew (1992). These theorists explore the complex, fluid, contradictory and dynamic nature of identity formation, as well as the oppressive discourses that might impact the identity construction process. As well, I also examine how identity operates in hip hop discourses. Theorists such as Ibrahim (2004, 2003, 1999), Dimitriadis (2001), McLaren (1997) and hooks (1994) unpack and/or problematize the way identity functions within hip hop, particularly the types of identities that have been heavily criticized for being racist, sexist and homophobic.

This chapter concludes with an analysis of theories centred on social agency, based on the writings of Holland et al. (1998) and Freire (1993). Freire frames social

agency in what he terms *dialogical action* while Holland et al. conceptualize it as *figured worlds*. Bakhtin's (1994, 1981) notion of *carnival* is also referenced in this discussion. I conclude the chapter by examining how writers of hip hop address social agency. At the core of hip hop's philosophy is its belief that silenced people can find voice in their rap against injustices so that social change can occur. This final section investigates the pedagogical potentials of hip hop in inspiring and empowering students to become agents for positive social change. Chang (2013), Cutler (2009), Abdullah (2006), Dimitriadis (2001), White and Cones III (1999), McLaren (1997) and others offer their perspectives on how hip hop can serve as a platform for marginalized people to access agency so that they can challenge the dominant discourse.

3.1. *Throwback 3*: Retrospective Reflection on the *Tetherball Chink* Incident

The following text provides an account of an unpleasant incident I experienced when I was enrolled in Grade 5 in a small town in British Columbia, five years after my arrival in Canada:

The tetherball dangles lifelessly from a coarse thick rope that is wrapped around what seems like a skyscraper-length pole. It enjoys a moment of peace before the recess bell rings, bringing forth a cacophony of youngsters eager to infuse life into the tetherball. Andrew (pseudonym) is my greatest nemesis. He wins each challenge so convincingly and so often that he rarely has to leave the coveted circular perimeter. On this day, I would defeat Andrew, but instead of basking in the glory of my triumph, I taste the sting of his words – "You stupid chink!"

When I first recalled the above incident in my role as an educator near the beginning of my teaching career, it piqued my curiosity about how identity operates. Since then, I have been interested in how marginalized students' identities are positioned in school settings.

3.2. *Frontin'*:
Identity Theory

To "front" is when an individual puts up a facade to present him or herself to others in a certain way. "Frontin'" can be used to impress others with a version or variation of self that is considered desirable or advantageous within a particular social setting. "Frontin'" can also be used as self-defence, posing as an intimidating figure not to be messed with for example. And "frontin'" can be a way of experimenting with various facets of self, particularly the parts that are often hidden from general view. Basically "frontin'" means you can be anyone you want to be.

In academic terms, "frontin'" is really about identity construction. According to Hall et al. (1992) in the Enlightenment Era identity was once believed to be something that was "fully centred, unified,…endowed with the capacities of reason, consciousness and action, whose 'centre' consisted of an inner core" (p. 275) of set attributes. This limited and "fixed" way of conceiving identity did not conceptualize identity formation as predicated on many undeterminable and unpredictable variables that impact, shape, re-shape, shift, modify and alter a person's identity, as scholars do today. Thus, unlike a Hollywood or Disney construction of stock characters, such as the flawless beautiful princess or the sinister villain, for contemporary identity theorists, identities are not black and white, but rather richer shades and textures of greys. Contemporary sociocultural understanding of identity conceptualizes identity as being influenced and shaped by a number of social science fields, such as psychology, social psychology, anthropology and sociology (Holland et al., 1998). Rather than seeing identities as individualistic and autonomous, identity is understood as interconnected, interactive, in process, in history, unresolved, complex, negotiated, contradictory, fluid, experiential, experimental, dynamic, contested, conflicted and perhaps most importantly, always in the making (Holland et al., 1998; Hall, 1996; Hall et al., 1992). More specifically, identities are influenced by a range of socio-cultural-political-economic variables, such as one's race, culture, language, class, religion, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation and so on. Identities are ultimately multi-layered, multi-textured and multi-faceted.

Yon (2000) stresses the need to conceptualize identity as "mediated and produced by cultures and socialization" (p. 13). Both Holland et al. (1998) and Hall

(1996) also write about the interconnectedness of culture, society and identity and the interplay between the three as instrumental in the process of making and becoming self. Hall (1996) explains the construction of identity as multifarious and conglomerate: "Precisely because identities are constructed within, not outside, discourse, we need to understand them as produced in specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formations and practices, by specific enunciative strategies" (p. 4).Simply put, "Identity cannot be defined in isolation" (Dei, 1996, p. 31), nor can it be defined simply.

Rogoff (2003) is a sociocultural theorist who advances the theory that identities are shaped by an interplay of both the biological and the cultural: "This artificial separation treats biology and culture as independent entities rather than viewing humans as biologically cultural" (p. 63). The overlapping and intertwining of biology and culture, influencing, forming, shaping and re-shaping each other is how Rogoff conceptualizes the formation of a self, where she warns that it is "false to assume that universals are biological and variations are cultural" (p. 64). Rather than viewing biology and culture as competitors, she posits that the two are more like co-conspirators dependent on one another in the complex process of human development.

What further compounds the elusiveness of identity is its shifting, morphing, altering, adapting and ever changing state. Because of the dynamic nature of identities, they are "always in the making" (Ghosh, 1997, p. 7) and "we are forever negotiating who and what we are" (Dei, 1996, p. 31). We never arrive at a finish line per se, but continue to run a multi-directional course, sometimes backtracking and sidetracking, but always encountering and discovering uncharted routes. Thus, the inability of our identities to be frozen in time and space, argue Holland et al. (1998), means "persons are malleable, changeable," and "improvised" (pp. 4-5).

Butler (1997) offers another understanding of identity in what she terms the *performative* aspect of identity making. Butler frames this *performative* theory around gender roles, arguing that the hegemonic social scripts act to standardize and normalize the prescribed notions of what is entailed in being male and being female within the dominant cultural milieu. These social scripts dictate how individuals must *perform* on the bigger social stage, which we internalize and then reproduce: "People tell others who they are, but even more important, they tell themselves and then try to act as though

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they are who they say they are" (Holland et al., 1998, p. 3). However, those who do not understand, misunderstand or misread the social script, face social punitive consequences, especially if they dare to challenge the script, deviate from it or worse yet, try to re-write it. For example, Butler (1997) argues that "those who fail to do their gender right are regularly punished" (p. 405), which is particularly evident in school hallways.

Some narratives can be a kind of social script that can assist one in identity formation. Dimitriadis (2001) argues that the role of stories and in particular the narratives found in popular culture texts and performances such as hip hop, have the potential to impact youth's conception and formation of their selves: "Narratives order events and relevant participants in ways that implicate larger meaning-making systems or discourses. These narratives, or stories, are the tools through which we understand ourselves and our relationships to others" (p. 94). He goes on to explain that there are two central kinds of narratives, one that is more fluid while the other is static. The former allows us to respond to and negotiate with it in contextual ways, while the latter remains rigid and authoritative, not permitting us to even question it. These authoritative kinds of narratives, argues Dimitriadis, are sometimes found in formal school settings, where there tends to be one way to tell a story. On the other hand, Dimitriadis explains that some youth tend to gravitate towards the narratives found in popular culture rather than the ones told in the classroom because the characters, plots, conflicts and themes in the world of hip hop, for example, tend to resonate more with their realties and their identities. In addition to being able to relate more to the narratives found in hip hop, youth also want to be part of the story writing process, rather than just have their stories already written for them.

Holland et al. (1998) emphasize that we need to understand that identities are socially constructed "through the mediation of powerful discourses" (p. 26). Thus, agency over one's identity formation is dependent on a number of factors, some over which one has little or no control. And the degree of control over one's identity construction can vary significantly from one individual to another, depending on where one is positioned within the dominant cultural landscape. Those most centred are more autonomous, although still never completely liberated from authoritative influences, while

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those most marginalized encounter more obstacles and restrictions to their fashioning of self. Sarkar and Allen (2007) point out that,

> Identities are both discursively constructed and subject to the power relations between social discourses and the individuals who inhabit them. By acknowledging power relations in the construction of identities, we conceptualize identity construction as a process whereby individuals (with varying degrees of agency) are in constant dialogue with the discourses in which they are embedded. (p. 120)

And although there may be some room for negotiation in regards to one's direct influence in the constructing of oneself, many in fact have little or virtually no say in who they are and who they aspire to be. As such, Yon (2000) argues that these identities are susceptible to being "shaped by alienation, racism and a pervasive feeling of exclusion from the dominant culture" (p. 58).

Ibrahim (1999) adds that for some their identities are trapped in what he terms a *social imaginary*, "a discursive space or representation in which [identities] are already constructed, imagined, and positioned and thus are treated [tainted] by the hegemonic discourses and dominant culture" (p. 353). In an autobiographical text, Ibrahim (2003) recounts how he came to understand that prior to his immigration to Canada from North Africa, his identity of blackness in North America had already been constructed.

> As a refugee in North America, my perception of self was altered in direct response to the social processes of racism and the historical representation of blackness whereby the antecedent signifiers (*tall, Sudanese, academic, basketball player*, and so on) that used to patch together my identity became secondary to my blackness, and I retranslated my being: I became black. (p. 55)

Ghosh (1996) elaborates on this *social imaginary* by pointing out that an ethnic identity, for example, is often constructed by the dominant culture's perception and definition of what that ethnic identity is or at least should be, through the dominant culture's social lens, rather than through the lens of those who actually embody the ethnic identity.

The construction of identities in *authoritative discourses* can result in the stripping of identities, or as Freire (1993) puts it, *dehumanizing* them, which results in "a distortion of the vocation of becoming fully human" (p. 26). A snowball effect occurs, for when one

is stripped of one's humanity, one is more prone to further exploitation, which makes it easier to justify further attacks since what is ultimately being abused is actually not really human in the first place. But the assault on one's identity doesn't stop here, for further damage is inflicted upon the already fragile and compromised identity:

> Self-depreciation is another characteristic of the oppressed, which derives from their internalization of the opinion the oppressors hold of them. So often do they hear that they are good for nothing, know nothing and are incapable of learning anything — that they are sick, lazy, and unproductive — that in the end they become convinced of their own unfitness. (Freire, 1993, p. 45)

Once the individual has been subjected to the process of being dehumanized, what is also lost in the process is "its" agency to resist, revolt and reform, leaving the power of the *authoritative discourses* fully intact.

One arena in which powerful discourses construct negative identities in young people is found in the school setting. Woods (1990) argues that schools can be a "battleground for personal identity" because of the oppressive nature of the "customary emphasis on uniform and appearance, codes and behaviour, and mortification to purge the incoming tainted self" (p. 196). From bell schedules, desks in straight rolls to grade assignments and curricula materials, schools are havens for discursive forces that dictate how young people go about shaping who they are inside the school walls and who they will be once released to the outside world. Dei (1996) is especially critical of schools' role in further alienating and marginalizing their most vulnerable students:

> For minority students in particular, the nuances of their shifting identities and intersecting marginalities are exacerbated by the failure of the education system to recognize that all students enter classrooms with a reservoir of cultural and political capital. When minority students, for example, utilize such capital to resist hegemonic norms and values and patriarchal structures that they perceive as subordinating them even further, students are labelled "deviants," "problem children" and "at-risk youth." (p. 78)

As a result, argues Hill (1998), marginalized students are denied what he terms, *discursive potency*, which is the power to affect change in the social world. Hill explains that they "are constructed as identities who are significantly discursively incompetent,

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and whose ineptness distinguishes them from us, reinforcing our own identity as fully subjected, 'law-abiding' masters of discourse" (p. 59).

3.3. *Black Don't Crack*: Hip Hop Identity

On one level the expression, "black don't crack" refers to the versatility of black skin to disguise the aging process in black people's physique. "Black don't crack" is also "cracking" a joke at its white counterpart, whose "pale" skin tends to highlight rather than cover up signs of aging, such as wrinkles. In this rare case, blackness is actually seen as desirable, which is often the other way around when traditionally contrasted with whiteness. On another level, "crack" is urban vernacular for cocaine, which used in this context is actually addressing the stereotype that all black people either use or sell drugs – "black DON'T crack" is refuting this stereotype. Most importantly, "black don't crack" speaks to the resilience of black people who although they have faced and continue to face atrocities, oppressions and injustices, refuse to "crack" under the constant pressures put on them and their identities.

In the face of being *de*faced by the dominant culture of mainstream white America, African Americans, black youth in particular, used hip hop as a way to maintain and develop their identities as both a defensive and offensive constructive move. Today this strategic approach to identity construction continues to be utilized by black youth and marginalized groups especially and popularized through hip hop music and videos. It is also common to see school-aged boys, both coloured and white, re-enacting, re-appropriating and even assuming the identities they see being produced from their hip hop idols in music lyrics and video images:

> The black male is the centre in hip hop culture. The male-to-male relationships are often confrontational and egocentric leading to violence over issues of disrespect. The Gangsta style originated from gang bonding. So a Gangsta has a posse or soldiers that become family and protection. Hip hop culture connects with prison culture as well. Basketball is big in hip hop culture. It is a sport where black males excel. Basketball skills are a way to prove your manhood. Hip hop also depicts male-female relationships through subject-object detachment. Black men are portrayed as sexual subjects; women therefore are the hypersexual

objects and nothing more than a "booty call." For example, men acting in rap videos will grab the genital area with one or both hands as a gesture of sexual prowess disrespecting women as mere objects…. Hip hop culture is homophobic; real men "dog the women." (Price, 2005, pp. 59-60)

In what follows, I will survey theorists who offer perspectives on black identity, with some even speaking specifically to black identity in hip hop. Some of these writers include Cutler's (2009) "Nigga" identity, Majors' (1999) "cool pose" identity, Dimitriadis' (2001) "violent outlaw" identity, Durham's (2007) "ghetto" identity, Hill's (2009) "queer" identity, Fanon's (1970) "inferiority" identity, Marriott's (2000) "self-loathing" identity, Staples' (1982) "suffering-black-man" identity, hooks' (1994) "black-male-thing" identity and Baldwin's (2004) "misguided" identity. Many of these theorists do not simply dismiss identity play in hip hop discourse as merely sexist, racist, misogynistic and homophobic without consideration of the complexities involved in all forms of identity construction. Rather, they aim to contextualize and investigate, as well as problematize the multi-faceted, contradictory, fluid and elusive interplay of identity in hip hop discourse in a way that will better inform us on how students themselves engage with identity issues through the music they listen to and the videos they watch. These theorists recognize the uneasiness, tensions, conflicts and struggles associated with the building of the hip hop identity, which I argue is a very similar condition for many young people trying to figure out who they are, who they want to be and who they will become, especially in the very unforgiving and punitive spotlight of a secondary school environment.

One's individual identity can be defined by one's association with others of like mind, race, class, gender and other sociocultural groups. Cutler (2009) argues that the "Nigga" identity in hip hop is about assuming a commonality, connection and allegiance with other black, or traditionally oppressed and marginalized peoples. The word Nigga is the derivative of Nigger, a derogatory slur originally conceived and used by white slave owners to distinguish themselves from their servants. Essentially, Nigger means the other, non-human, abnormal, deficient, unintelligent, uncivilized, undesirable and anything lacking redeeming qualities. Yet ironically, some black people, particularly some youths, have reclaimed the word as a way to strip the power and monopoly whites had over it. This is most evident in the hip hop world, where the word Nigger and its variations are commonly found in the lyrics of many raps and songs. Cutler explains that

in the hip hop context, the "Nigga" identity is not something that is necessarily prescribed by the white man, but rather is a self-proclaimed identification of brotherhood and solidarity with other black men. In fact, many current and popular hip hop artists celebrate "Nigga" identity as something that is positive, powerful, vocal and ultimately desirable (Dimitriadis, 2001).

Alim (2004), who studies language use in hip hop discourse, explains that Black Language (BL) is "a complex system of structure and use that is distinct from White Mainstream English (WME)" (p. 233). He argues that before we denigrate BL, such as its use of the word Nigger, we need to ask why WME is "standard," "official," "normal," "appropriate," and respectful. Essentially, Alim is critical of how WME is given "linguistic supremacy" (p. 233). Low's (2011) study of how students engage with the word Nigger supports Alim's claim that BL is more complex and contextual than WME is willing to acknowledge in formal educational settings. Low's study concludes that for some students, the meaning of the word Nigger is flipped into a variety of positive meanings, tend to reference social behaviour more so than race and is "framed as an act of historical remembering or witnessing," (p. 128) rather than a disrespecting of ancestors. Furthermore, Low argues that "identities get performed through language choices and uses," (p. 115), which he gleaned from how the students in his study explained their relationship with hip hop rhetoric.

Perhaps the most visually apparent evidence of identity reproduction influenced by hip hop found in the halls and classrooms of the modern school is the boys' over-exaggerated identity posturing that is synonymous with the rappers in the music videos they watch. Usually adorned in draping sports jerseys and baggy, hanging-below-the-waist jeans with oversized brand name basketball sneakers, the physical look of this kind of posturing is as in-your-face as the arrogant get-outta-my-way swagger, boisterous greetings of, "Sup, dawg?" and the complicated handshake requiring a number of intricately choreographed moves of twists, turns and slaps. Majors (1999) terms this the "cool pose" identity (cited in Whites & Cones III, p. 91). Whites and Cones III go on to describe the "cool pose" identity as one defined by black men's "physical postures, clothing styles, social roles and social scripts, behaviours, styles of walk, content and flow of speech, types of dance, handshakes, and attitudes that are used to symbolically express masculinity" (p. 91). Because masculinity is automatically equated

with heterosexuality within a high school setting in particular, projecting a "cool pose" identity is often a survival technique that allows boys to avoid ridicule, bullying and marginalization within this homophobic environment. The "cool pose" is thus a declaration of his heterosexuality, or put another way, his normality. The "cool pose" identity, with its exaggerated sense of "control, pride, dignity and personal power" (p. 92), is also a defence mechanism for coping with the limited opportunities afforded to black men. Incidentally, some white men assume these postures too. White and Cones III go on to argue that assuming the "cool pose" identity is one way in which some black men counter the hegemonic production of their identities. However, White and Cones III are quick to point out that a "cool pose" identity is merely a façade to hide real feelings of fear, sadness, tenderness, disappointment, despair, etc., truly felt by black men whose agency in the world is limited.

The antithesis of the "cool pose" identity is the "queer" identity in hip hop, as conceptualized by Hill (2009). Hill posits the argument that there is no place for the "queer" identity in hip hop because of its need to preserve the "myth of universal heterosexuality" (p. 30) and sustain "hegemonic conceptions of masculinity" (p. 31). Hill explains that the "queer" identity is marginalized in hip hop through homophobic rap lyrics spouted by the industry's most successful artists, such as Nas, Jay-Z, 50 Cent, and Eminem. In fact, there is hip hop "battle" technique that Hill terms "lyrical outing" (p. 37), in which feuding rappers accuse each other of participating in homosexual acts or possessing homosexual tendencies. The marketing of the "cool pose" identity in juxtaposition to the absence of any openly LGBT hip hop artists speaks to the "queer" identity's undesirability.

Closely connected to the "cool pose" identity is what Dimitriadis (2001) terms the "violent outlaw" identity. Gangsta Rappers, in particular, present and sell their image as the outsiders, who are marginalized by the dominant white culture. Because of this expulsion from the wealth, resources and opportunities afforded to insiders, the "outlaw" has no choice but to resort to violence and crime in order to claim his fair share of the goods. The "outlaw" follows his own set of rules and he will kick, punch, stab, rape, torture, shoot and even kill if he has to. Thus, he "embodies such capitalist values as rugged individualism, rampant materialism, strength through physical force, and male domination, while he rejects the very legal structures defining that culture" (p. 29). This

figure of the rebel who isn't afraid to stand up for his rights by whatever means he deems necessary, is a fixture in hip hop discourse, a role model to many youth lacking agency, as well as a menace to the very society that believed that by locking him out, it would keep citizens safe.

Edwards (2006), who also writes about black male identity and hip hop, surveys a number of theorists who offer more perspectives on how black men negotiate their gender and sexuality. Edwards reminds us that Fanon (1970), in his *Black Skin White Masks*, explains that the history of oppression suffered by black men at the hands of white men has resulted in the development of an "inferiority complex" identity within the black male consciousness where their sense of internal security has been severely eroded. The exaggerated male bravado commonly found in hip hop lyrics and music videos could be a positional strategy compensating for a supposed deficiency of masculinity. In the fantasy world of hip hop music videos, the black man identity is always in charge, always in control and always in power, unlike the harsh reality of life outside the hip hop bubble. Edwards (2006) also references Marriott's (2000) study, *On Black Men*, in deepening our understanding of black masculine identity. Marriott (2000) argues that because black men have been misrepresented by the dominant mainstream culture so often, black male identity is adversely affected, resulting in what he describes as an internalization of self-loathing and lack of self-esteem. Edwards (2006) also refers to Staples' (1982) *Black Masculinity* to argue that feminism, in critiquing the misogyny of black men and helping women of colour develop positive identities, has failed to fully recognize the conditions in which black male sexism is connected with a history of colonialism, slavery and the emergence of modern day capitalism. Staples (1982) posits that feminism does not take seriously and even ignores the fact that black male identities are also suffering, even in the face of their sexism and misogyny.

Prominent feminist theorist hooks (1994) is often asked about her take on the misogyny in hip hop music by critics of the music. hooks is critical of the mainstream critique of hip hop that equates the misogyny found in the music as a "black male thing." This racialized approach to deconstructing misogyny in hip hop, argues hooks, acts to further "demonize" black male identities. She is particularly critical of the dominant white culture's blaming of one group of people, black males, for the misogyny that she points out exists in the greater dominant white society.

To see Gangsta Rap as a reflection of dominant values in our culture rather than as an aberrant "pathological" standpoint does not mean that a rigorous feminist critique of the sexist and misogyny expressed in this music is not needed. Without a doubt black males, young and old, must be held politically accountable for their sexism. Yet this critique must always be contextualized or we risk making it appear that the behaviours this thinking supports and condones, --rape, male violence against women, etc. – is a black male thing. And this is what is happening. Young black males are forced to take the "heat" for encouraging, via their music, the hatred of and violence against women that is a central core of patriarchy. (p. 1-2)

hooks reminds white critics that hip hop music is not produced in a "cultural vacuum," pointing out that sexism and misogyny are much more complicated than just a black issue. For hooks, the dominant, white, heterosexual, middle class, Christian, male is just as guilty of sexism and misogyny as popular hip hop artists Akon and Snoop Doggy Dogg.

Ibrahim (1999) adds that construction of blackness in white dominant culture is one that is consistently tainted, flawed, undesirable and ultimately negative, which detrimentally impacts one's self-representation in the face of this problematic portrayal. For example, Durham (2007) explains that whenever someone labels her "ghetto," her identity is being "tied to a physical space" that is "uncouth," (p. 160). Similarly, McLaren (1997) argues that the mainstream white culture's assignment of the black "Gangsta Rap identity" (p. 180) is a binary technique for drawing the racial line between good-white and bad-black. Slapping the "Gangsta Rap identity" on young black men is exoticizing, criminalizing, demonizing and demoralizing identity, and in the process objectifying to the degree that black men are no longer seem as *real people*, which then makes it even easier to continue ripping and stripping away at their identities until there is nothing left.

Baldwin (2004) argues that even the middle class black community has failed black youth in its struggle for new ways of making identity, deeming the black youth identity "as false articulations of blackness, and therefore irrelevant" (p. 161) because it deviated from the new middle class black sensibility of capitalism that supposedly "blurs distinction between themselves and their oppressors" (p. 161). However, hip hop offers black youth a place to construct self in the face of under-representation, misrepresentation or no-representation at all. Hip hop, explains Baldwin (2004), counters

"negative notions of blackness with its own 'racial authenticity'" (p. 160). In conjunction with graffiti art and break dancing, hip hop, argues Holtzman (2000), is about showing off one's identity in the face of social oppression. Hip hop allows for those who have limited agency over the formation of their identities a space to re-claim, define and even redefine who they are (Petchauer, 2007; Sarkar & Allen, 2007; Abdullah, 2006; Njubi, 2001). Hip hop offers an "alternative source of identity formation" (Petchauer, 2007, p. 28) where marginalized youth can participate in self-naming-identity rather than accept imposed name-given-identity from the hegemonic discourse. Sarkar and Allen (2007) explain that "name-proclaiming" in hip hop, for example, is an identity construction process where hip hop artists "engage in name claiming in publicly performing particular responses to certain social discourses" (p. 121). Abdullah (2006) speaks about the popular tradition of highlighting one's name during hip hop performances as a way to publicly – *no need to conceal one's identity* – and proudly – *no need to be ashamed of one's identity* – claim who one is, showing-off one's agency in one's identity formation. Along with the constant reference to one's name during hip hop performances and in lyrics, artists also reference communities, neighbourhoods and geographic regions as a "shout out" [paying respect] to one's home, even if that home is found in the poorest corners of America (Abdullah, 2006). Therefore, reference to one's "ghetto" and one's "hood" in hip hop is proclaiming one's sense of respect and pride for where one comes from.

3.4. *Throwback 4*: Retrospective Reflection on *Papa's Pedagogy*

My father was a high school dropout. He dropped out when he was only fourteen years old. He traded in his education for an ice cream cart. My father chose to drop out because his father (my grandfather) – passed away unexpectedly. And because he was the eldest of nine children, he felt the duty to sacrifice his formal education so that he could help support his mother (my grandmother) – and his sisters and brothers. For twelve hours a day, everyday, my father pedaled his ice cream cart around the streets of Saigon, selling cold treats at about five Canadian cents a piece.

Although my father did not acquire a formal education, he did possess a will for hard work. He applied his impeccable work ethics into amassing quite a successful shampoo and hair product business with his brothers. With each passing year, he enjoyed the luxuries that wealth brought, giving his young family a very comfortable life amidst the poverty surrounding him. But surrounded by the opulence, my father was not satisfied. He looked at his children and realized that although he could give them all the basic necessities and even more required to live a productive and happy life in Saigon, he knew that there was something missing. You see, because my father never received a formal education, he desperately craved one for his children. But not just a basic education… rather he dreamed of an education that he believed only a Western World could offer.

So he relinquished his business, all his assets and left the world and people he knew all his life for the unknown destination ahead. With wife and three young children in tow, he embarked on the harrowing journey to a refugee camp in Indonesia, having unwavering faith that his ultimate sacrifice would reap greater rewards for his children. Although life in a refugee camp was difficult, his gamble paid off, for our family was offered citizenship in Canada.

But life for a new immigrant who did not speak the dominant language and who did not understand the culture was a life of challenges. My father, who worked his way up from an ice cream vendor to a successful businessman found himself right at the bottom again, washing dishes in a foreign land. He slaved for Canadian employers who exploited his immigrant status by overworking him, underpaying him and sometimes even not paying him at all. While he shuffled between his two low paying and hard labour jobs, he would make time to remind me how important getting a good education in Canada was. To this day, I still remember him saying, "Son, I use my hands so you can use your head."

Although my father lacked much of the social, cultural and political capital found in Canada, he instilled in me the belief that I could exercise my own social agency through education.

3.5. *Fight the Power*:
   ## Social Agency Theory

In the late-1980s, Public Enemy's smash hip hop hit single, "Fight the Power" not only caused ripples through the music industry but it also ignited public consciousness and conversation. Aside from the fact that the rap was a catchy, beat and bass-heavy musical innovation, it was its message of challenging the authoritative discourse that resonated most with those who are marginalized in society. It also got the attention of those in power, who feared the message behind the rap would ignite public riots, looting and violence against law enforcement officers. Originally released as the lead single for Spike Lee's commercially successful and critically acclaimed movie Do the Right Thing, a controversial film chronicling the struggles of urban black youth as they try to negotiate the poverty, crime and violence of their neighbourhood, "Fight the Power" became an inspiration for black youth to rise up against oppressive regimes and served as an anthem for a new generation of youth. Public Enemy claimed that "Fight the Power" did not incite violence against authority but rather spoke to combating the abuse of power to "revolutionize, make a change."

Scott and Morrison (2006) define the word agency within an educational context as an "active and intentional role of the individual in the construction and reconstruction of social life," (p. 8) particularly for those people who do not possess much agency within capitalist and racist institutions, structures and discourses. And although the concept of social change is difficult to fully encapsulate, Hertzler (1970) articulates some of its key elements,

> A widely inclusive term – the generic designation for all societary modification. More specifically, it consists in alterations of societal structures, of patterns of social behavior and relationships, of social positions and conditions of population elements, of social functions and processes. As in change in general, causation is always involved. Social change, of course, may be permanent or temporary, and beneficial or harmful in its effects; it may be planned or unplanned and unidirectional or multidirectional. (p. 117)

Freire (1993) speaks about change as rooted in those who would most benefit from it. He asks, "Who are better prepared than the oppressed to understand the terrible

significance of an oppressive society?" (p. 27). He conceptualizes change in two distinct stages, the first being the "unveil[ing] of the world of oppression" (p. 36), which is the progress of bringing about social consciousness and shedding light on the well-hidden exploitation, alienation, marginalization and other injustices inflicted upon society's most vulnerable people. The second stage, although difficult to achieve, is "permanent liberation," (p. 36) when critical pedagogy does not belong to the oppressed but rather to all people. In order to achieve such a social state of freedom, he advocates for a *dialogical theory of action* model, in which change can occur through a number of transformative initiatives. Firstly, *cooperation*, in the sense that no one becomes a *subject* to be dominated, is essential to "transform[ing] the world" (p. 148). But with *cooperation*, there is the need for what he terms *unity for liberation*, which requires leaders to focus their efforts on bringing the oppressed together to share and express their collective experiences. On a pragmatic level, the next stage, *organization*, is about establishing efficient and productive ways of bringing about change that is tangible. Finally, *dialogical action* involves *cultural synthesis*, "a systematic and deliberate form of action which operates upon the social structure, either with the objective of preserving that structure or of transforming it" (p. 160). Freire also envisions change not just for the oppressed, but also for the oppressors. He argues that the oppressed must liberate both themselves and their oppressors, because those who "oppress, exploit, and rape by virtue of their power cannot find in this power the strength to liberate either the oppressed or themselves" (p. 26). Freire advocates for compassion, pointing out that in the act of oppressing others, the oppressors become de-humanized; the oppressed can help the oppressors to reclaim each other's humanity. Only then, claims Freire, has change really occurred.

Holland et al. (1998) conceptualize *figured worlds* as worlds of discourse, such as the world of business or the world of education, where certain phrases mean certain things, where certain behaviours are rewarded and where certain people are at the top while others are at the bottom. *Figured worlds* are not necessarily "good" or "bad" places. However, *figured worlds* can be places where social agents can explore, engage and experiment with possibilities and potentials for themselves as well as for bringing about social change in the *real* world. *Figured worlds* can move beyond the realm of imagination, to spaces of possibilities where imagination might be enacted:

First, figured worlds are historical phenomena, to which we are recruited or into which we enter, which themselves develop through the works of their participants. Figured worlds, like activities, are not so much things or objects to be apprehended, as processes or traditions of apprehension which gather us up and give us form as our lives intersect them. Second, figured worlds, like activities, are social encounters in which participants' positions matter…. Third, figured worlds are socially organized and reproduced; they are like activities in the usual, institutional sense.(p. 41)

Although not always the case, *figured worlds* can be an escape for some people from some of their physical world of limitations and restrictions. Untouched possibilities and potentials can be discovered, explored and experimented with in *figured worlds*. *Figured worlds* offer visitors more tangibility and agency over the crafting of their visions of themselves as well as the sociocultural world they inhabit. *Figured worlds* are playgrounds for identity exploration, experimentation and formation. *Figured worlds* are not completely void of any structure and even hierarchy, but there is room for negotiation. In *figured worlds*, individuals can strip, alter, shape and re-shape who they are and what they aspire to become. Holland et al. explain that *figured worlds* allow for a fashioning of both self and society, where one's history, present and future intermix; the result can be a re-conceptualized new reality at both the individual and sociocultural levels.

Holland et al. (1998) argue that "by modeling possibilities, imaginary worlds can inspire new actions; or, paradoxically, their alternative pleasures can encourage escape and a withdrawal from actions" (p. 49). This new way of seeing the self and the world can be achieved through a process Holland et al. term *improvisations*, which are "the sort of impromptu actions that occur when our past, brought to the present as *habitus*, meets with a particular combination of circumstances and conditions for which we have no set responses," which I understand as a *figured world* (pp. 17-18).Unlike a scripted scene, *improvisations*, like theatre sports, require the actors to leave their place of familiarity and comfort for perhaps uncharted and even dangerous terrain. Within this condition, the actors must draw upon their past experiences and craft, and integrate them with the impromptu snippets of lines or spontaneous props, or what Holland et al. call *artefacts*, occasionally thrown at them. When these actors practice and improvise navigating, negotiating and realigning their "positioning by powerful discourses" (p. 16) through their engagement with *figured worlds*, they can better "figure" out who they are,

how they are situated in the sociocultural world, and perhaps even how they can reform and reshape their sociocultural positioning.

One kind of *figured world* where change can be enacted is found in Bakhtin's (1984) extensive study of the Medieval *carnival*. Bakhtin argues that *carnival* is a vibrant improvisational space where current realities are challenged and new possibilities are enacted. He describes *carnival* as,

> a boundless world of humorous forms and manifestations [that] opposed the official and serious tone of medieval ecclesiastical and feudal culture. In spite of their variety, folk festivities of the carnival type, the comic rites and cults, the clowns and fools, giants, dwarfs, and jugglers, the vast and manifold literature of parody – all these forms have one style in common: they belong to one culture of folk carnival humor. (p. 4)

Bakhtin points out that *carnival* was a place that provided a counterworld to the oppressive religious and political indoctrination of the Medieval times, where all individuals could find freedom in merriment, celebration and laughter. *Carnival* was a "consecration of inequality" (p. 10), albeit temporary, where the social hierarchy was reversed, gifting power to those at the bottom while stripping it from those at the top. The potential for social transformation during these festivities, adds Berger (1997), is great:

> The carnival may be seen as the final stage in the progression of the comic from brief interruption of social order to the full-blown construction of a counterworld. These comic intrusions are temporary, but they are always there as haunting possibilities, simultaneously liberating individuals and making the guardians of order very nervous. (p. 84)

When we are liberated from the *authoritative discourses* in society that prevent or discourage our critical consciousness and re-imaginings of our self and the world, Bakhtin (1981) argues that we shift to what he calls an *internally persuasive discourse*:

> When thought begins to work in an independent, experimenting and discriminating way, what first occurs is a separation between internally persuasive discourses and authoritarian enforced discourse, along with a rejection of those congeries of discourses that do not matter to us, that do not touch us. (p. 344)

According to Bakhtin, change cannot occur unless we are guided by this *internally persuasive discourse*. *Carnival* is an example of a kind of *figured world* in which individuals who are normally dictated by the *authoritative discourse* can begin the process of shifting to a more *internally persuasive discourse*.

A number of researchers who write about social change consistently point to education, schools and teachers as powerful catalysts for bringing about change for their students and the greater society (Emdin, 2013; Dei, 2005, 1996; James, 2005; hooks, 2004, 1994; Ghosh & Abdi, 2004; Yon, 2000; Thiessen, Bascia & Goodson, 1996; Delpit, 1995, 1988; Paley, 1995, 1989; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Casey, 1993; Freire, 1993; Greene, 1993). Their writings offer both theoretical and first-hand accounts from educators as to how social change is enacted and realized from a pedagogical perspective that is premised on the core belief that education and teachers do play instrumental roles in helping to pave the paths of possibilities and opportunities for all students to navigate. Although Ghosh and Ray (1995) concede that coming up with an all-encompassing definition of social change is difficult at best, they clearly envision the enacting of social change as the process of affecting "new patterns of social interaction" (p. 6) that challenge existing social beliefs and practices that have traditionally marginalized certain groups of people, particularly in school settings. Ghosh and Ray question and challenge the existing hegemonic structures that continue to plague Canadian schools, arguing that positive change can only come about when all students, regardless of their "sex, race or ethnicity, social class, birth place, citizen status, or religion" (p. 4) are afforded the same opportunities for success inside and outside the school walls that their dominant culture peers enjoy.

Paley (1995, 1989), Ladson-Billings (1994) and Casey (1993) in particular, regard teachers as the key ingredient in stirring change in their students, classroom, school and the greater community. Unlike some education research that is ivory tower-entrenched, their writings specifically chronicle the direct daily classroom rituals of practicing teachers and honour the important work these practitioners do for both their students and society. Casey, Paley and Ladson-Billings also focus on extraordinary teachers who must negotiate the circumstances that accompany their most vulnerable students. Specifically, they enact the change process through curricula that address diversity, inclusiveness and equity (Greene, 1993). These teachers do not treat their

students like empty vessels to be filled with "knowledge," like money being deposited into an empty bank account (Freire, 1993). Rather, these teachers honour their students' unique, complex and rich identities. Their students' identities are meaningfully reflected in the curriculum. Through innovative, sensitive, personalize and transformative pedagogy, these teachers truly help to change the lives of their students for the better.

3.6. *Changes*:
Hip Hop and Social Change

One of the most popular hip hop songs for many students is Tupac Shakur's "Changes," an iconic rap reflecting on the issues faced by the black community in the United States, where drugs, poverty, crime, violence and racism continue to plague his people. In the song, Tupac angrily spouts,

> I'm tired of being poor and even worst I'm black / My stomach hurts so I'm looking for a purse to snatch / Cops give a damn about a negro / Pull a trigger kill a Nigga he's a hero / Give the crack to the kid who the hell he cares / One less hungry mouth on the welfare / First ship 'em dope and let 'em deal the brothers / Give them guns step back watch 'em kill each other.

Tupac's social commentary on the perpetual marginalization of black people by the white dominant culture in the U.S., juxtaposes both a pessimistic and optimistic outlook for the future of his people. Although Tupac repeatedly raps "I see no changes" and "That's just the way it is," he also encouragingly pleas, "We gotta make a change," and "You see the old way wasn't working so it's on us to do what we gotta do." Tupac recognizes that social change is a difficult, slow process that requires much sacrifice, a point that is punctuated in the last line of his song with the onomatopoeic gunshot sound, "rat-tat-tat-tat-tat." Ironically, Tupac succumbed to a hail of bullets in the last minutes of his life. Even so, the title of his song pointed to the need for change.

Not surprisingly Tupac's music appeals to and resonates with a great number of students, even those who do not necessarily listen to rap or hip hop regularly. Dimitriadis (2001) explains that a great part of Tupac's relevance and appeal lies in his provocative, personal and genuine lyrics, clever sampling of catchy hooks and a carefully crafted,

marketable image of a tough yet sensitive Gangsta identity. Although Tupac can be just as guilty as Akon and Snoop Doggy Dogg at times for promoting misogyny and glorifying street violence in his lyrics, his extensive musical arsenal of powerful social messages advocating social consciousness and social change make him one of the most compelling, complex, contradictory and compassionate hip hop artists of all time.

Abdullah (2006), Njubi (2001) and McLaren (1997) remind critics that hip hop, at its core, was about dismantling social norms and challenging the hegemonic establishment of capitalism that locked blacks out and considered them as a bunch of "'lowlifes' singing about their crime-ridden hoods" (McLaren, 1997, p. 160). This was enacted in their rapping, their break dancing and even in their defacing of public property with their graffiti (Abdullah, 2006). Durham's (2007) recollection of how the race riot of Norfolk Virginia on Labour Day of 1989, sparked by Virginia Beach's merchants' racist refusal to serve black college students, was inspired by the music: "Irreverent rap lyrics, such as N.W.A.'s "Fuck the Police" and Public Enemy's "Fight the Power" thumped from booming sound systems" (p. 158). And Chang (2013) echoes his predecessors when he declares that "Hip-hop celebrates and enacts desegregation where politics still fail it. It connects the world. It changes the world. It's a movement of hope" (p. viii). When it come to social change, hope is necessary, and it is in abundance in hip hop.

White and Cones III (1999) argue that although hip hop tells its followers that race is a social barrier and a challenge to accessing the resources available to most whites, at its roots however, is hip hop's transformative message of inspiring marginalized youths to "seize the power to transform their lives, take charge of their destinies and create an optimal range of life choices" (p. 96). This can be achieved, proclaims hip hop, through education, empowerment and social activism (Petchauer, 2007). Ibrahim (1999) emphasizes that fundamentally, "Rap and hip-hop are also sites of hope and possibilities" (p. 367). Boyd (2002) explains that unlike the daily grim reality facing many black people trying to navigate through a white world, the world of hip hop offers possibilities "where Blackness has been normalized, and whiteness treated as the Other" (p. 23). Boyd further explains that in the hip hop world, "blackness" becomes the standard by which whites are judged. Cutler (2009) points out that even the most successful white hip hop artist of all time, Eminem, is not immune to the scrutiny of "the normative Blackness" (p. 80) found in hip hop.

Cutler (2009) also goes on to explain the agency of *stance*, a socially strategic move used by rappers when they engage in a non-physically violent hip hop war of rhetoric, rhythm and rhyme known as MC battles. The *stance* is how rappers socially position themselves in regards to their identity, class, race, ethnicity and other social markers that privilege or marginalize individuals in society. Because rappers possess the agency to assume whatever *stance* they prefer during MC battles, they are able to readily access perspectives, voices, roles and identities that normally would be unavailable to them in their real world. Cutler recognizes the transformative potential of the *stance* as it can "reveals an alternative social order in which normative Whiteness is challenged and ultimately subverted" (p.81). Although Cutler recognizes that this shift in white/black power dynamics is limited to the social spheres of entertainment/music and even sports/basketball to some extent, she does not underestimate the potential for social change to occur when hip hop is able to offer youth a space for critical thinking, discussion and articulation of what she calls "alternative conceptions of authenticity" (p. 92).

From an education perspective, Bruce and Davis (2000) argue that "A Hip-hop oriented pedagogy seeks first of all to reconstitute as subjects those who have been treated as objects" (p. 122). Bruce and Davis, as well as Cutler (2009), Abdullah (2006) and Dimitriadis (2001) all believe that hip hop has the potential to point out social injustices, create spaces for marginalized voices, offer critiques of hegemonic institutions, suggest social revisions and solutions and inspire people, particularly youths, to work towards positive social change.

However, Chang (2013) warns educators that hip hop pedagogy cannot take the place of good teachers and educational resources. That said Chang believes that "Hip-hop education offers the real possibility of transformation" (p. ix). For this to occur, Low (2011) stresses the need for "culturally responsive pedagogy" (p. 112) that challenges the dominant Eurocentric discourse of school curricula, not just in English classes, but curriculum wide. Emdin (2013) is a teacher-researcher doing just this in his classroom. Although Emdin comes from an urban Science education perspective, the implications of his pedagogy do inform the Language Arts curriculum. Emdin is critical about the way some educators have approached a hip hop pedagogy, often done in a trivial way, such as simply using rapping as a rote learning technique for helping students memorize

course content. In fact, he argues that the superficial treatment of students' hip hop is just as bad as ignoring it altogether. Emdin uses a hip hop pedagogy in his urban Science curriculum to dispel the myth that the field of Science is just for white people, similar to how the study of Language Arts is conceptualized by some students of colour. For example, Emdin employs the hip hop "rap battle," where rappers confront each other in a linguistic exchange of words, attitude, posture and message, as a tool for helping his students to deeply understand course content, formulate arguments, articulate findings and positing hypothesises. In doing so, he honours his students' hip hop discourse, understands the complexities and nuances associated with it, helps bridge his students' informal curriculum with the one in his class and fosters engagement in learning.

3.7. *Gimme the Low Down*: Chapter Summary

The purpose of this chapter was to outline how theories of identity and social agency inform my research. I examined how issues of identity and social agency are taken up in hip hop.

In the first part of this chapter, I discussed the contributions of researchers who argue that identities are not fixed nor can they be essentialized but rather they are complex, fluid, contradictory, negotiated and dynamic. They also see identity as shaped by discourse and power. To what degree this impacts one's identity depends on how one is situated in the dominant culture. Butler (1997) suggests that there is a *performative* element to identity formation, especially in regard to gender role playing, while Holland et al. (1998) stress that identity is ultimately socially constructed by hegemonic discourses, which can be *dehumanizing* according to Freire (1993). Dimitriadis (2001) talks about the narratives in popular culture as influential to youth identity construction. Identity play/construction is prevalent in hip hop, evident by the many young boys and girls who attempt to emulate their hip hop heroes or the scantily clad women in the videos. The latter half of this section examined the many *faces* of hip hop, such as the "Nigga" identity, "cool pose" identity, "queer" identity, "violent outlaw" identity, "black-male-thing" identity and "ghetto" identity. Although McLaren (1997) and hooks (1994) do not condone the racist, sexist and homophobic posturing associated

with many of today's popular hip hop artists, they argue that the same kind of scrutiny of hip hop must extend to the larger racist, sexist and homophobic discourses in society.

In the final section of the chapter, I discussed social agency. One important theorist, Freire (1993), outlines a number of key steps to achieving social change, first being an "unveiling," ending ideally in "permanent liberation." Bakhtin (1984, 1981) argues that one's social agency is only as potent as how far one is able to gravitate from the *authoritative discourse* to an *internally persuasive discourse*. Holland et al. (1998) conceptualize *figured worlds* where possibilities are imagined, improvised and enacted so that new worlds and realities might be created. Paley (1995, 1989), Ladson-Billings (1994) and Casey (1993) point to the work of teachers who challenge the dominant culture within the formal curriculum as instrumental in helping to affect positive change in the lives of students. Finally, the chapter concluded by referencing Tupac's hip hop anthem, "Chances" as a reminder of what hip hop was supposed to be about, which was to give voiceless people a means to express their discontent over social injustices so that they can help to inspire and bring about social change. Chang (2013), Emdin (2013), Cutler (2009), Abdullah (2006), Dimitriadis (2001), White and Cones III (1999) and McLaren (1997) offers perspectives on how hip hop can enable disenfranchised people the opportunity to play a role in affecting self and social change.

The theoretical framework outlined in this chapter and the previous one serve to ground my interpretations of how students come to understand race, identity and social agency through their engagement with hip hop. In the following two chapters, I focus on the research methodology, first contextualizing the research process (Chapter 4) and then discussing the data collection strategies (Chapter 5).

4.   *Method Man*:
   Research Context

One of the most influential hip hop artists of the 1990s was a well-respected rapper, MC and record producer named Method Man. Not only is he known for his top selling and Grammy award winning music, but he was also one of Notorious B.I.G.'s closest confidants. Originally a member of the equally well renown hip hop group the Wu-Tang Clang, Method Man was a controversial hip hop figure who liked to do things his own way, making enemies with hip hop heavyweights in the music industry as well as getting in trouble with the law. Like his namesake, he was very methodical in the way he fashioned his hip hop career, first branching off to a solo music career and then diversifying in the acting world with roles in gritty feature films about urban America as well as critically acclaimed TV series.

Creswell (2007) reminds researchers that when they conduct qualitative research, they need to understand that their worldview, also known as paradigm, philosophical assumption or interpretive framework, will impact the direction and shape of their research. He stresses that researchers need to explicitly disclose their worldview to, as Hatch (2002) puts it, "unpack their ontological and epistemological beliefs" (p. 2). The purpose of this chapter is to contextualize and describe how I conceived and designed the methodological framework and approaches for gathering the qualitative data required to help address my research. My methodology was designed to uncover how students at *Mosaic High* engage with hip hop and how this engagement informs their understanding of complex issues such as race, identity and social agency.

In what follows, I situate my methodology in an interpretive epistemology consistent with qualitative research. Specifically, I focus on how case study methodology adopted here is an appropriate qualitative approach for my study. The *bounded system* (Creswell, 2007) of my case study is the school site of *Mosaic High*, where hip hop discourses outside the formal curriculum and school hours play a particularly prominent

role in the lives of the students. After contextualizing and describing the research site, I provide profiles of the students and teacher participants. I then explain the recruitment process for both the group and individual interviews. This includes detailing the five central data gathering venues: (a) the focus group, (b) *Speak*, (c) the *Mosaic High Dance Team*, (d) *Access Denied*, and (e) one-on-one interview sessions.

4.1. *Dats My Shit*: Interpretive Epistemology

When one claims ownership to one's material possessions or creative ideas, the expression "Dats my shit" is employed. It is a public declaration of one's intimate connection to the object or concept at hand, casting away any doubt as to one's association with it.

The interpretive epistemology in which my study is situated aligns with my own social constructivist perspective. I view the human world as something that needs to be seen through interpretive lenses (Scott & Morrison, 2006; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Qualitative researchers ground their studies in the settings of their subjects' immediate, local realities, and closely examine the complexities and nuances of how people make sense and meaning from their various encounters within their social worlds (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Gerson & Horowitz, 2002; Hatch, 2002; Miles & Huberman, 1994; LeCompte & Preissle, 1993;). Scott and Morrison (2006) add that in an interpretivist paradigm, "social actors negotiate meaning" (p. 131) through their interactions in the world, much like the individuals in sociocultural theorists Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner and Cain's (1998) figured social worlds. The social settings inhabited by these social actors, are unique, dynamic, complex, fluid and always in flux (Silverman, 2006; Hatch, 2002). Silverman (2006) argues that because qualitative researchers come to terms with the elusiveness of social reality, "it makes no sense to worry about whether our research instruments measure accurately" (pp. 46-47). Denzin and Lincoln go so far as to state that all forms of research are on some level interpretive in nature because it is never neutral to the researchers' conception and understanding of the world around them, even if their beliefs are unacknowledged. Interpretive epistemology, argue Denzin and Lincoln, generates meaning artistically and politically, and through this generation the

world can never be completely comprehended. Although positivists attempt to "legislate one version of truth over another," (p. 8) Denzin and Lincoln stress that there is no such thing as one version of truth. Creswell (2007) explains that a social constructivist worldview seeks to understand the multiplicities, varieties and complexities of meaning generated by those within a particular shared setting.

My research examines how students and teachers come to understand how hip hop shapes young people's consciousness around issues of race, identity and social agency, and how understanding this process might help to reshape the Secondary Language Arts curriculum. Because I was curious about how students create meaning around hip hop, I relied extensively on their views, something Creswell (2007) stresses is important when gathering data for case studies. This social constructivist view of the world recognizes the interweaving of participants' histories, lived experiences and cultures as shaping how they come to understand the social setting they are a part of: "Constructivists assume a world in which universal, absolute realties are unknowable, and the objects of inquiry are individual perspectives or constructions of reality. While acknowledging that elements are often shared across social groups, constructivist science argues that multiple realities exist that are inherently unique because they are constructed by individuals who experience the world from their own vantage point" (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, cited in Hatch, 2002, p. 15). The many voices represented in my research echo the multiplicity of the students' understandings, which allowed for many diverse perspectives on such complex issues as race/racism, identity and social agency/change.

Denzin and Lincoln (2005) point out that constructivism, feminism, Marxism and socio-culturalism are some of the many influential theoretical lenses that help to shape and inform qualitative methodology. The multiplicity of voices contributing to interpretive epistemology, argue Denzin and Lincoln, ensure that meaning is not solely generated, analyzed and interpreted through the colonial lens of the European, white, male, Christian, middle-aged, heterosexual researcher, who with his data would uncritically represent the "dark-skinned Other to the white world" (p. 1). Reynolds (2002) argues that issues around researchers' race, class and gender will impact the power dynamics in any research. Power in research, argues Reynolds, is "multifaceted, relational and interactional and is constantly shifting and renegotiating itself between the researcher

and the research participant according to differing contexts and their differing structural location" (p. 308). Hatch (2002) points out that qualitative research involves reflexivity and reminds us of the important need to continually reflect personally and academically on, for example, the power dynamics we bring to our research. This is a sentiment that hooks (2004) hopes researchers take more seriously: "White scholars can write about black culture or black people without fully interrogating their work to see if it employs western intellectual traditions to re-inscribe white supremacy, to perpetuate racist domination" (p. 150). hooks, Hatch and Dei (2005) are asking academics to *unpack* their privileges (McIntosh, 1989), for researchers bring to their research and reflect upon "their own understandings, their own convictions, their own conceptual orientations; they, too, are members of a particular culture at a specific historical moment" (Miles & Huberman, p. 8).

Giving voice and agency to traditionally marginalized peoples is central to qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Gerson & Horowitz; Hatch, 2002; Miles & Huberman, 1994; LeCompte & Preissle, 1993). Qualitative research focuses on the realities of the research participants (Scott & Morrison, 2006). Key also to qualitative research is interaction between researcher and subject (Hatch, 2002). Jamal (2005) also stresses the need for qualitative researchers to develop trusting relationships with their research subjects so that there can be a more liberating exchange of meaning making between researcher and subject throughout the research project. This does not mean the researcher is silenced in the research, but rather is a co-creator of meaning with his or her research subjects (Scott & Morrison, 2006; Silverman, 2006; Hatch, 2002).

Hatch (2002) points out that this collaboration between researcher and subject, which is generally frowned upon in quantitative work, has the potential to inspire and bring about social, political and economic change. Kincheloe and McLaren (2005) see the potential of this collaborative approach, explaining what could occur: "The research moves those it studies to understand the world and the way it is shaped in order for them to transform it" (p. 324). In fact, Miles and Huberman (1994) argue that interpretive epistemology can even yield "serendipitous findings" (p. 1) and "develop new concepts rather than imposing preconceived categories" (Gerson & Horowitz, 2002, p. 199) that can lead to new conceptual understandings of the world that is consequently transformable.

4.2. *We Got a Situation Herre*: Case Study Methodology

In hip hop, when something is worth a closer inspection, examination or consideration, one calls attention to it by saying, "We got a situation herre."

Case study is essentially an ethnography that takes a closer look at a situation. The case study is an established approach to pursuing and exploring qualitative inquiry (Scott & Morrison, 2006; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Stake, 2005; Eisenhardt, 2002; Hatch, 2002) that appeals to many researchers for a number of reasons, one being its ability to gather a large amount of potentially rich data for in depth study (Scott & Morrison, 2006, p. 17). Case studies are useful for studying contemporary practices (Hatch, 2002), such as hip hop, and are effective for addressing new research areas where theories are meagre, insufficient, out-dated or inaccurate (Eisenhardt, 2002). Scott and Morrison point out that for educational theorists and practitioners specifically, case study methodology is more conducive to first-hand study of the impact of hip hop in classrooms and schools.

Case study is an interpretive methodological approach where researchers focus on one single setting and try to co-create meaning and understanding with their research participants about the dynamics that emerge from their collective interactions in that setting (Scott & Morrison, 2006; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Stake, 2005; Eisenhardt, 2002; Hatch, 2002). Creswell (2007) describes it as an extensive look at an issue that is bounded by a setting and/or context. In regard to my research, participants are all *bounded* in some significant way by their intimate involvement and engagement with hip hop within the *setting* of their school, *Mosaic High*, where hip hop initiatives outside the formal curriculum and after the official school hours are influential to the daily lives of the students inside and outside the school walls.

Case study methodology is also empirical in that it focuses on the lived experiences of the research participants and attempts to comprehend their meaning making within the social, political and cultural contexts that interplay with the construction of their understanding of the world (Scott & Morrison, 2006; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Stake, 2005; Eisenhardt, 2002; Hatch, 2002). Case study enables

participants to convey and communicate their personal experiences and perspectives through their descriptions, interpretations, opinions, feelings and/or combination of these (Stake, 2005). Thus, multiple sources within the case must be tapped in order to comprehend its vastness and richness (Yin, 2009; Creswell, 2007). Or as Baxter and Jack (2008) put it, the variety of data sources "supports the deconstruction and the subsequent reconstruction of various phenomena" (p. 544). In my study, this was achieved through extensive use of individual and group interviews, observations and artefacts, which will be detailed later in this chapter. As noted by Baxter and Jack, researchers who use case studies must be careful to avoid trying to influence participants to respond in a certain way that may in fact be self-serving to the researcher's agenda. Scott and Morrison stress that with case study methodology, it is important to honour the research participant's voice in the research process and product. With this in mind, I gathered data directly from one particular setting where students engage meaningfully with hip hop and I sought to provide various platforms for participants to share their experiences and perspectives.

Theoretically, case study methodology is also effective in helping revisit and refine pre-existing theories, generating more inquiries, problematizing complexities and limiting generalizations (Stake, 2005). Stake also warns that the intent of case studies is "not to represent the world, but to represent the case" (p. 460). The core of case study methodology, explains Yin (2009), is that it adds knowledge to the field. It may also influence policy making judgments and decisions and serve to inform pedagogy for educational theorists and practitioners (Scott & Morrison, 2006).

4.3. *My Hood and My Crib*: The *Mosaic High* Community and School

The hip hop word "hood" is used to designate neighbourhood and/or community. The word "crib" is a hip hop colloquial term for home or place of residence associated with safety and comfort.

The following section describes and contextualizes the community and the specific school that constitute the research site of this study. This case study is bounded by the participation of students in the hip hop initiatives at their school, *Mosaic High*, also

a place where I teach. Although Creswell (2007) argues that conducting research in one's place of employment "raises questions about whether good data can be collected when the act of data collection may introduce a power imbalance between the researcher and the individuals being studied" (p. 122), research safeguards can be implemented to minimize this imbalance. I will return to this point in greater detail in the section regarding the participant protocols. As an adult, teacher, male and Chinese, I am placed so that I can see and hear some things that others might not. Hammersley and Atkinson (1992) describe research settings as, "not naturally occurring phenomena; they are constituted and maintained through cultural definition and social strategies. Their boundaries are not fixed but shift across occasions, to one degree or another, through processes of redefinition and negotiation" (p. 42). As a teacher in the site, my work with colleagues in the school, my direct interaction with the students in and outside the classroom and my daily and yearly exposure to the routines, rituals, traditions and regular and irregular patterns of operation occurring in the building all afford me a privileged understanding of the nuances of the place not possible for non-members. As a member in this community, I had observed some pedagogically rich ways in which students and teachers were engaging with a variety of hip hop discourses reverberating through the school community. Rather than selecting another site where hip hop pedagogy was in play, I chose to examine how this was occurring in my own *crib*, a context I understood quite well as an insider.

Creswell (2007, p. 122) also warns of the potential danger of critiquing one's place of employment as it may jeopardize one's standing if "unfavourable data" is reported about the institution. Mindful of this, from the onset, I aimed to be as transparent as possible about my research intentions with all direct participants, as well as indirect participants such as the school administration and school district. Research ethics protocol was followed closely in obtaining permission to conduct this research. Clearance was first granted by the school principal in the site before formal permission was given by the school district's senior research analyst, and I received permission as well from SFU's Ethics Board. A central aim of my research was to treat the site with great respect, not only because I work there, but because I want to contribute to making the school even more diverse, inclusive and equitable for all students.

Mosaic High was first built in 1957 as an elementary school in what is now one of the largest school districts in the Lower Mainland. The once predominantly white and middle class neighbourhood would soon see a significant change to its cultural landscape in the late-1970s and particularly in the 1980s and 1990s. In 1992, *Mosaic High* was rebuilt as a secondary school (Grades 8 to 12) to accommodate the growing and shifting student population. The influx of new immigrants from various parts of the world, particularly from the Philippines, Vietnam, Korea, China, India, Pakistan and Somalia to name a few regions, contributed to the cultural diversification of the area. Low income houses and apartment complexes were built to address the residential needs of new families and their young children. These affordable homes continue to be permanent fixtures encircling *Mosaic High*'s vicinity today, as are the new immigrant families who continue to arrive in the catchment yearly. According to the 2001 Canada Census, 24% of the families within the *Mosaic* community earn an annual income of less than $30,000, while the average income is $53,200. Eighteen percent of the homes are classified as "lone-parent families." Pockets of poverty, prosperity and everything in between make up this community. With respect to education, 75% of *Mosaic*'s surrounding population aged 20 or over have graduated from secondary school, while only 13% of the people possess a bachelor's degree or higher (Statistics Canada, 2001).

When *Mosaic High* was rebuilt in 1992, it was meant to accommodate about 1300 students. According to the most recent 2009/2010 *Mosaic School Plan Report* (pseudonym) distributed to the staff by the principal, *Mosaic High* currently serves approximately 1500 students. Certainly one of the challenges for students and staff is overcrowding, which has been further complicated by the building project recently approved by the Ministry of Education and the school board to proceed with major renovations to *Mosaic High*'s structural foundation and plumbing. According to the report, the student body is composed of 39 different cultures where English is not the predominant language. The report also notes that 55% of *Mosaic High*'s students come from homes where English is not the primary language of communication; 17% of these students have official ESL designation, although in reality this figure should be at least doubled as even without an ESL designation, there are many students struggling with English language proficiency. *Mosaic High* has 28 students from Aboriginal backgrounds. In addition, it has 35 international students from a variety of countries who

pay school district tuition to attend *Mosaic High*. The report also states that there is no "dominant culture" and that "very few conflicts that are racially based occur and students are models of harmonious racial interaction" (*Mosaic School Plan Report*, 2009, p. 1).

Mosaic High is a designated inner city school. According to the school district's internal memo to administrators, a school categorized as inner city must meet the criteria based on,

> a weighted formula comprised of (family income and percentage of single parent families) and the Province of BC Vulnerability Index (percentage of families with children on income assistance and percentage of children in care) data. (*Mosaic School District* Memo, 2012, p. 1)

Once a school is given this designation, extra funding is provided for additional staff and learning resources to help address the unique needs of the student body, which is comprised of a significant number of culturally and linguistically diverse students who are generally not reflective of the dominant culture and are vulnerable to further marginalization.

Although the diversity of the student population is evident simply by walking down the halls, peeking into classrooms and even reading names on class rosters, the staff composition is not reflective of the multicultural makeup of the students at *Mosaic High*. Of the 90-plus full and part-time staff members, from teachers to support workers, approximately 10% of the adults mirror the cultural diversity of the students they serve. All the school counsellors are white. The school principal is a white male, and the vice-principals are a white male and a white female. A quick glance at the staff yearbook page suggests that the staff is much more homogenous than the student body.

Nevertheless, *Mosaic High* has made efforts to foster a school environment that is more inclusive of its very diverse student population. As its mission statement proclaims: "We are a caring and respectful community of learners working together to develop full potential in all." Other words, such as respect, excellence, attitude, community and honour feature in the statement of core educational values guiding *Mosaic High*'s philosophy. There is a wide range of leadership, sport and club opportunities for students with varying interests. *Mosaic High* is particularly proud of its multicultural day events on which many cultural practices are displayed and celebrated.

Along the main corridor of the school, flags from all around the world adorn the vaulted ceilings, which symbolically highlight *Mosaic High*'s commitment to welcoming people of all origins. A "multicultural worker" is on staff to assist in communicating with parents who do not speak English. In 1999, the Ministry of Education published a report recognizing *Mosaic High* as one of sixteen schools in BC that was particularly successful in promoting "exciting and creative learning opportunities" for students. *Mosaic High* was specifically praised for its parent-led staff development as well as its "multicultural activities to improve intercultural understanding." *Mosaic High* prides itself in its school motto that all students can succeed.

However, *Mosaic High* has its share of challenges, like many urban schools. Recently, to address problems in school completion rates, the *Mosaic High* administration's school plan goals include improving the graduation and success rates of students, particularly Aboriginal students. In the 2010 school failure rate report, Aboriginal students at *Mosaic High* accounted for a disproportionate number of failures: 25% of them failed one or more courses and 14% of them failed two or more courses, compared to 13% of non-Aboriginal students who failed one or more courses and 3% of non-Aboriginal students who failed two or more courses. When I spoke with the current administration and Aboriginal Support teacher in early 2013, they indicated that although there is a slight improvement in the failure rate of Aboriginal students, on the whole, the statistics from 2010 are similar to those today. The administration has tried to address this troubling trend by allocating staff meeting and professional development time to focusing on Aboriginal student needs and exploring how teachers can help these students achieve success in their classes. The administration has also designated one teaching block per semester for an on-site Aboriginal support worker to complement the itinerant Aboriginal aid member from the district level who is assigned to various schools in the city.

Some recent high profile negative press about the school involved a car accident in 2009 that was caused by one of *Mosaic High*'s students, whose excessive speeding resulted in the death of a mother. As well, number of false alarm bomb threats that same year resulted in a series of school wide evacuations and disruption of class time that were traced to a few *Mosaic High* students. In addition, a local paper recently published

an unflattering article detailing how drug dealers selling marijuana and cocaine specifically targeted *Mosaic High* students because they were good customers.

According to the 2008 Ministry of Education's Student Satisfaction Survey, which polls Grades 10 and 12 students in all BC public schools, only 66% of *Mosaic High*'s students indicated that they "felt safe all the time or many times in school." However, the 2009 in-school surveys conducted by *Mosaic High*'s administration found that 89% of Grade 8 students believed their school was a safe place for them. Eighty percent of the same respondents indicated that they felt they were part of the *Mosaic High* community, whereas 28% of the Grade 8 student body reported being bullied at the school. In the 2008/09 school year, the administration reported 119 cases of student referrals for transgressions such as bullying, assaulting, fighting, direct disobedience or disruption of classroom learning. This was a significant increase from the 38 referrals reported in the previous school year. Another in-school survey for Grade 9 and 11 students conducted in 2009 focused on the issue of social responsibility. When questioned about whether they valued "diversity and defending human rights," 84% of Grade 9 students responded affirmatively, while 82% of Grade 11 students concurred.

4.4. *My Posse*: The Research Participant Profiles

"My posse" is an urban hip hop term referring to one's close friends, supporters or family. It is a collective noun used in an endearing way to claim association with a particular group of people.

This section describes the group of participants in my research. In total, 28 participants were directly involved in the research, 23 of whom were current or former students of *Mosaic High*, while five were all current teachers at the school. All participants were asked to complete a Participant Profile Questionnaire (see Appendix A).

As indicated in Table 4.1 below, student participants represented Grades 8, 9, 11, 12 and recent graduates of mixed genders, ages and cultural backgrounds. At the time of the research I had taught or was teaching all but five of the total student

participants. All of the students were currently enrolled at *Mosaic High*, with the exception of four participants, who recently graduated the previous year. Of the 23 students, the majority of the participants were males, while seven were females. Although the ages of the participants ranged from 13 to 18, the great majority of the students were on the older end of the age spectrum. With the exception of four participants, almost all the students spent their whole secondary education at *Mosaic High*.

Data were gathered from the participants from a variety of hip hop venues within *Mosaic High*: *Speak* (seven students), *Access Denied* (one student), the *Mosaic Dance Team* (two students); one student participant belonged to both *Access Denied* and the *Mosaic Dance Team* (see Table 4.1). These three venues will be described in greater detail in the subsequent sections in the latter half of this chapter. The remaining student participants included the eight members of the focus group on hip hop and the four individuals who were interviewed one-on-one about their personal experiences with hip hop and/or contributed hip hop writing pieces to my research.

**Table 4.1.   Student research participants: General attributes
                (listed in alphabetical order)**

Name (pseudonym chosen by participant)	Gender	Age	Grade level at *Mosaic High*	Number of years at *Mosaic High*	Hip Hop Data Association
AJO	M	16	11	4	*Speak*
Alan	M	17	12	5	Focus Group
Alias	M	18	Graduated	5	*Speak*
Babs	M	17	Graduated	5	*Speak*
Cedric	M	14	9	2	*Mosaic Dance Team*
Complicity	F	18	12	5	Individual Interview
Daniel James	M	16	12	4	Individual Interview
Dee	F	17	12	5	Focus Group
GermME	M	18	Graduated	3	*Speak*
Jay	M	17	12	4	Focus Group
Joy	M	18	Graduated	5	Individual Interview
Kalvonix	M	17	12	5	*Access Denied*

Name (pseudonym chosen by participant)	Gender	Age	Grade level at *Mosaic High*	Number of years at *Mosaic High*	Hip Hop Data Association
Kim Park Chi	M	18	12	5	*Speak*
Laura	F	16	11	4	Focus Group
Manila Ice	M	17	12	5	*Speak*
Mytur	M	17	12	5	Focus Group
OJ the Juiceman	M	17	12	5	Focus Group
S-dawg	M	17	12	5	*Mosaic Dance Team*
Skye	F	16	11	½	Focus Group
STC	F	18	12	5	Other
Suey	F	17	12	5	Focus Group
TJ	F	13	8	½	*Access Denied & Mosaic Dance Team*
White Rice	M	17	12	5	*Speak*

Most of the student participants were born in Canada, while four were born in the Philippines and one was born in China (see Table 4.2). However, the student participants' parents and ancestors were originally from a variety of geographical locations around the world, including the Philippines, China, India, South Korea, Iceland, Ireland, Laos, Poland, Portugal, Scotland, Spain, Somalia, Vietnam and Wales. Only four of the students' parents were born in Canada. The great majority of the student participants have spent their entire lives in Canada, with of course the exception being the five students who were born outside Canada. Of those immigrant students however, all of them have lived in Canada for at least ten years, with the exception of one student, who had only been in Canada for five years.

Table 4.2. ***Student research participants: Cultural affiliations part A (listed in alphabetical order)***

Name (pseudonym chosen by participant)	Country of Birth	Parents' Country of Birth	Ancestors' Country of Birth	Number of Years in Canada
AJO	Canada	Philippines	Philippines	16
Alan	China	China	China	5

Name (pseudonym chosen by participant)	Country of Birth	Parents' Country of Birth	Ancestors' Country of Birth	Number of Years in Canada
Alias	Canada	Philippines	Philippines	18
Babs	Canada	Philippines	Philippines	17
Cedric	Philippines	Philippines	Philippines	11
Complicity	Canada	Laos	Laos	18
Daniel James	Canada	Canada	Iceland, Poland & Ireland	15
Dee	Canada	India	India	17
GermME	Canada	Philippines	Philippines	18
Jay	Philippines	Philippines	Philippines	10
Joy	Philippines	Philippines	Philippines & Spain	11
Kalvonix	Canada	Philippines	Philippines	17
Kim Park Chi	Canada	South Korea	South Korea	18
Laura	Canada	Canada	Scotland	16
Manila Ice	Philippines	Philippines	Philippines & China	15
Mytur	Canada	Vietnam	Vietnam	17
OJ the Juiceman	Canada	Somalia	Somalia	17
S-dawg	Canada	South Korea	South Korea	17
Skye	Canada	Canada	Portugal	16
STC	Canada	Philippines	Philippines	18
Suey	Canada	India	China	17
TJ	Canada	Philippines	Philippines	13
White Rice	Canada	Canada/Wales	Various Europe	17

All the student participants were English speakers, while ten were bilingual and three were trilingual (see Table 4.3). Languages other than English spoken by the bilingual and trilingual students included Tagalog, Korean, Mandarin, French, Ilongo, Lao, Punjabi and Vietnamese. In the home, only seven student participants spoke exclusively English with their parents, while three spoke no English at all at home. The rest of the student participants' homes used a combination of English and various heritage languages with their parents. Many of the students practiced a variety of religions, with Catholicism (8 participants) and Christianity (7 participants) being the

most popular in numbers. Agnosticism, Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam were each represented by one student participant, while four declared themselves Atheists.

Table 4.3.   ***Student research participants: Cultural affiliations part B (listed in alphabetical order)***

Name (pseudonym chosen by participant)	Language(s) Spoken	Language(s) Spoken at Home	Religion Practiced
AJO	English	English	Atheism
Alan	English & Mandarin	Mandarin	Atheism
Alias	English & Tagalog	English & Tagalog	Catholicism
Babs	English & Tagalog	English & Tagalog	Catholicism
Cedric	English, Tagalog & French	English & Tagalog	Catholicism
Complicity	English & Lao	English & Lao	Christianity
Daniel James	English	English	Agnosticism
Dee	English & Punjabi	English & Punjabi	Hinduism
GermME	English & Tagalog	English & Tagalog	Christianity
Jay	English & Ilongo	English & Ilongo	Catholicism
Joy	English & Tagalog	English & Tagalog	Catholicism
Kalvonix	English	English	Catholicism
Kim Park Chi	English & Korean	English & Korean	Christianity
Laura	English	English	Christianity
Manila Ice	English, Tagalog & French	English & Tagalog	Christianity
Mytur	English, Vietnamese & French	Vietnamese	Catholicism
OJ the Juiceman	English	English	Islam
S-dawg	English & Korean	Korean	Christianity – Methodist
Skye Patrick	English	English	Atheism
STC	English	English & Tagalog	Christianity
Suey	English	English, Hindi & Mandarin	Buddhism
TJ	English	English & Tagalog	Catholicism
White Rice	English	English	Atheism

In addition to student participants, the research also enlisted the aid of five teacher participants, four of whom were female except one (see Table 4.4). Three of the teachers were predominantly English (Language Arts) teachers, while other teaching subject areas represented included Aboriginal Support, Drama, Humanities, Learning Support, Math, Physical Education, Science and Social Studies. All the teachers have taught for at least five years, with the most experienced having taught 17 years. While one teacher had only been teaching at *Mosaic High* for a single year, the others have been there for at least four or more years; one teacher has been at *Mosaic High* for nine years. The teacher participants also sponsored a hip hop initiative in the school, with two teachers for each the school's *Mosaic Dance Team* and *Speak*, while one led *Access Denied.*

Table 4.4. ***Teacher research participants: General attributes (listed in alphabetical order)***

Surname (pseudonym chosen by participant)	Gender	Teaching Subject(s) / Grade(s)	Number of years teaching	Number of years teaching at *Mosaic High*	Teacher Sponsorship
Irshad	M	English 9-12	5	1	*Access Denied*
Jackman	F	English 10-12; Drama 9; Aboriginal Support Worker 8-12	12	7	*Mosaic Dance Team*
Mayo	F	Physical Education 8-12	16	5	*Speak*
Sahota	F	Learning Support 8-12; Math 11; Science 10	5	4	*Mosaic Dance Team*
Whedon	F	English 8-12; Literature 12; Social Studies 10, 11; Humanities 8	17	9	*Speak*

All the teacher participants were English speaking and Canadian born (see Table 4.5). Two of the teachers were bilingual, speaking either Fijian-Hindi or Punjabi as their additional language. However, in all their homes, English was predominantly spoken,

with the exception of one who spoke Punjabi as well. Religion practiced in the form of Islam and Sikhism was each represented by one teacher, while the remaining participants were either Agnostic or Atheist.

Table 4.5.   *Teacher research participants: Cultural affiliations (listed in alphabetical order)*

Surname (pseudonym chosen by participant)	Country of Birth	Language(s) Spoken	Language(s) Spoken at Home	Religion Practiced
Irshad	Canada	English, Fijian-Hindi	English	Islam
Jackman	Canada	English	English	Agnosticism
Mayo	Canada	English	English	Atheism
Sahota	Canada	English, Punjabi	Punjabi	Sikhism
Whedon	Canada	English	English	Atheism

4.5. *Taggin' the Homies and the Shawties*: The Participant Recruitment Process

The word "homie/homey" is the shorten form of "homeboy," meaning one's friend. Whereas "homie/homey" is the masculine version, "shawty/shorty" is its feminine equivalent, referring to a young and/or sexy woman. "Taggin'," like the childhood game Tag, identifies who's "it."In hip hop dance and rap battles, "taggin'" occurs when a competitor, upon completing his or her routine, "tags"/selects his or her opponent, who then continues the competition.

In this section, I describe why and how the research participants were selected. In addition to choosing an appropriate and fertile site for the research Creswell (2007) argues that selecting the individuals from the site for the study is just as important since "they can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study" (p. 125). One of my challenges in selecting participants among the 1500 student population enrolled at *Mosaic High* as well as the 90-plus staff members was to identify a manageable pool of participants and select a sample of students and teachers who could offer wide ranging perspectives about their

experiences with hip hop. The following paragraphs detail how I selected 23 students and five teachers to serve as informants for my study in the belief that they "possess special knowledge, status, or communicative skills and who are willing to share that knowledge and skill with the researcher" (Zelditch, 1992, cited in LeCompte & Preissle, 1993, p. 166).

As described in the previous section, *Mosaic High*'s diverse student demographic as well as the many vibrant venues in which hip hop is central to the unofficial curriculum in the school, were significant factors that contributed to my recruitment of participants from this particular site rather than some other high school. Venues, such as *Mosaic High*'s hip hop Poetry Slam event, dance team and rap group, which will be described shortly, provided specific locales within the school where I recruited my participants. In addition to student participants, my study included teacher participants who supported and sponsored one of the aforementioned hip hop initiatives at *Mosaic High*. I thought that their informed input would further complement and enrich the data provided by students. Other participants included students who volunteered to share their experience, knowledge and/or love for hip hop and students who chose to be part of a focus group I set up to discuss more specific issues about hip hop.

Creswell (2007) points out that when conducting research on one's own students, concerns around issues of power imbalance will inevitably arise. Since the teacher/researcher ultimately has the power to determine the students'/research participants' academic fate, he recommends that safeguards must be implemented to prevent introducing a bias in the data. For example, if research subjects believe that forwarding a particular view would garner them higher academic results or refraining from espousing a particular perspective would prevent them from being academically punished, the study would yield data that would be more likely inaccurate, fabricated, skewed and/or tainted on some level. Because I was particularly conscious of this potential problem, I ensured that participation in my research was done on a voluntary basis, during out-of-class time and provided assurances that it would have no bearing on students' grades. Students were also informed that no bonus marks could be earned nor marks deducted by agreeing or declining to participate in my research, and that at any time, they could opt to withdraw from the study without prejudice. These stipulations were explicitly communicated in verbal and/or written forms to the students, their

parents, the administration, the school district and the university. All students/participants, as well as their parents, were required to sign official ethics release forms approved by the university to indicate that they fully understood the research procedures as well as the conditions for participation.

4.6. *Taggin' the Groupies*:
   ## Recruiting the Focus Group Participants

My first task was to form a focus group comprised of *Mosaic High* students and give them a formal venue to share, discuss, critique and interact with each other around the subject of hip hop. Since there was no such activity offered at the school, the focus group became a pedagogical space of sorts on a small scale.

Because I teach Secondary Language Arts at *Mosaic High*, it seemed fitting that I would recruit research participants from my classes. Originally, I envisioned recruiting eight senior secondary students, four females and four males, from a variety of cultural, ethnic, linguistic and racial backgrounds with varying degrees of knowledge and opinions about hip hop music. Several researchers note that heterogeneous groupings increase the possibility of conflicts arising compared to more homogeneous groupings (Steward, Shamdasani & Rook, 2007; Kleiber, 2004; Bloor, Frankland, Thomas & Robson, 2001). However, I thought that such "conflicts" could generate rich data and perhaps even paint a more realistic picture of the contentious discourse that circulate around hip hop music. It seemed to me that the purpose of employing the focus group interview was not to necessarily achieve consensus but rather to facilitate the emergence of a variety of perspectives (Bryant, 2007; Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005; Vaughn, Schumm & Sinagub, 1996).

Initially, I presented a brief ten minute overview of my research project and offered my approximately 110 students in four classes of Grades 12 and 11 the opportunity to participate in a focus group. I offered to provide more details at a future lunch hour meeting for those who were interested in participating. I was pleasantly surprised that about 30 students attended the lunch meeting. I had initially planned on forming a focus group with no more than eight members as to allow for enough space

and time for each one to engage, participate and voice his or her perspectives. In the event that more students expressed interest than there was space available, which in fact was the case, I thought of a way to select them in as fair of a manner as possible. After I elaborated on the particulars of my research and fielded inquiries from those in attendance, all the prospective participants formally acknowledged their continued interest by signing their names on a list. I informed the students that after I met with a few others who could not attend this particular meeting, I would then put all their names into a basket and randomly draw eight names in order to limit the number of participants. I believe this lottery process was important because I did not want any students to think that certain individuals were given preferential treatment. I also informed them that to diversify the gender makeup of the focus group, four males and four females in total would be selected. The names in the basket represented a wide range of cultural diversity and provided a sampling that was representative of *Mosaic High*'s culturally rich student population.

Following many of the same principles as when I assembled a focus group for my MA thesis (Kuoch, 2005), I recruited participants who were my former or current students at *Mosaic High*. Gerson and Horowitz (2002, p. 209), in their general description of an interview, referred to the participants as "strangers" and the research sites as "unknown places." My connection to the students and the school itself was far from this so that in contrast, prior to the study, I had already established a close relationship with my participants. It was crucial to my study because the intimate nature of the discussions in the focus group sessions about the students' reflections on their views and personal experiences of racism, injustice and oppression, made it imperative that they feel trusted, respected and comfortable disclosing their thoughts. Hatch (2002) reminds researchers that "participants are the ultimate gatekeepers. They determine whether and to what extent the researcher will have access to the information desired" (p. 51). I have already worked to build and strengthen my bond with my students throughout their time with me in the classroom by providing them with a learning environment that I believed was safe, encouraging, inclusive, diverse and equitable. I believed that their trust facilitated their support and enthusiasm for my research in a way that would not have been possible with a disconnected, neutral "stranger" who temporarily parachuted into the "unknown place" to gather data from subjects. Rather, I

saw myself as a *co-constructor* (Hatch, 2002) of knowledge with the participants, convinced that my relationship and bond with students would foster a more fertile space for collaboration that could yield richer data than I would have obtained in a site that I knew less well. Thus, contrary to Gerson and Horowitz's assertion that securing participants is the "most anxiety-provoking task" (p. 209) for a researcher, my search for participants within the pool of my former and current students was exciting and rewarding because it resulted in a greater number of willing and enthusiastic candidates than I had anticipated.

4.7. *Taggin' the Slammers*: Recruiting the Poetry Slam Participants

Speak is a student initiated, teacher sponsored and administration sanctioned Poetry Slam event that has occurred in the evening once a year at *Mosaic High* since 2007. Modeled after popular Poetry Slam events that take place in urban cafes, *Speak* was founded by a former *Mosaic High* student, Babs. It is a venue for students to express and voice their views, perspectives, ideas and insights about a variety of current issues that are personally important to them in front of a live audience, predominantly composed of peers, students, parents, teachers, administrators and other members of the local community. This non-profit and non-fundraising event showcases the students' talents and original works in a variety of expressive forms, such as music, dance and poetry. Many of students' original pieces and performances are heavily inspired by hip hop. *Speak* is predominantly organized, run, advertised and performed by students for students, on their own free time.

In the spring of 2009, Babs, who was also an English 12 and Literature 12 student of mine at the time but has since graduated from *Mosaic High*, approached me about attending as well as composing and performing an original piece for *Speak*. This was my introduction to an event that was quickly becoming an institution at *Mosaic High*. Although the event is predominantly for students, the organizers asked selected teachers, mostly those in the Language Arts department, to participate in composing and performing their original work; I was one of three teachers who agreed to share their compositions at the *Speak* event that year, both as a first-hand observer and an on-

stage performer. The following year, I collaborated with students on a performance piece as well as assisted in sponsoring the event. Through my exposure to *Speak* I witnessed how hip hop heavily influenced the way students expressed themselves, particularly the way the boys challenged traditional poetry reading conventions with a rapping technique for communicating words in a way that was edgy, jarring, bold, confrontational, sarcastic, angry, raw and loud. They assumed bodily postures, poses and gestures that mirror the popular hip hop/rap artists of the time. The boys adorned themselves with baggy jeans, oversized sports jerseys, basketball sneakers and flashy jewellery that emphasized their physical prowess, while the girls wore brightly coloured, tighter fitting, shorter length skirts and cleavage exposing apparel that accentuated their sexuality. They didn't write about pretty flowers, birds and oceans, but rather scribbled unpolished verses about being different, isolated, stereotyped, misunderstood, blamed, passed over, and other similar themes of powerlessness, yet all the while delivering their messages with power. I had observed that their words resonated strongly with the audience members, who cheered, hollered and nodded in agreement before rising to their feet in thunderous applause. Essentially, these students made poetry relevant, contemporary and simply, they made poetry "cool" for their peers and themselves.

To understand the phenomenon that is *Speak*, who better to enlist than the pioneers and performers of the event? Three of the core student organizers/performers of the 2009 *Speak* event had been students of mine. As recent *Mosaic High* graduates, Babs, Alias and GermME were instrumental in contributing to the conception, development, advertisement, popularity and success of *Speak*. In the summer of 2009, I invited these young men to share their contributions to and experiences with *Speak* with a group of approximately three hundred pre-service teachers in a course I was teaching at the University of British Columbia. After this session, I talked to them about my plan to conduct a research project on hip hop and told them I wanted to include *Speak* in the study. All three enthusiastically offered to participate in my study. As well, four other *Mosaic High* students who were still enrolled in the school at the time and performed in the 2010 *Speak* event contributed their writing pieces to my research, although they were not individually interviewed.

While *Speak* is known for being a student-led, student-organized and student-centred event, it still required the sponsorship of teachers to make it all possible. Thus, I

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also solicited the participation of the two sponsor teachers for my research, as I was interested in understanding how and why they became involved in supporting the students who worked on *Speak*.

4.8. *Taggin' the B-boys and B-girls*: Recruiting the Dance Team Participants

Mosaic High offers a variety of clubs and sports teams for students. One of the most popular clubs, evident by the large number of students interested as well as the rigorous audition process involved, is the *Mosaic Dance Team*. Students from Grades 8 to 12 interested in learning dance techniques and performing for school functions, such as assemblies, pep rallies, dance competitions and other special events, jockey for spots on this popular dance team. Dance has recently gained more popularity and general acceptance from the student body of both genders at *Mosaic High*. This is most likely because of the current urban dance culture on such television shows as "So You Think You Can Dance" – both the American and Canadian versions entitled "America's Best Dance Crew" and "Dancing With the Stars."

Walking through the halls of *Mosaic High*, it is common to see students of both gender break into an impromptu dance "battle" or to see young girls and boys experiment with a variety of "old-school" and "new-school" break dancing and hip hop moves. These gravity-defying manoeuvres are athletic and acrobatic in nature, with the students arching and stretching their limbs in unimaginable positions, while the current hip hop hits and beats blast from their portable speakers. Since the element of dance is as core to hip hop as its beats and poetry and because hip hop dance in particular is so much more popular than any other form of dance with *Mosaic High* students, I wanted to better understand how young people explored their identities and agency through hip hop dance

The three student participants drawn from the *Mosaic Dance Team* contributed to my understanding of hip hop and dance. Only one of the three participants was a former student of mine. Cedric, who was highly recommended to me by both of the *Mosaic Dance Team* sponsors, was the student dance team leader. Although he is a trained

dancer who competes for a dance club outside *Mosaic High*, Cedric's primary responsibilities included auditioning dancers, organizing rehearsals, choreographing routines and offering leadership and guidance. In fact, he preferred this administrative role to being just one of the dancers. As such, having his perspective about the *Mosaic Dance Team* was particularly valuable as he was able to offer both front and backstage perspectives of the dance team. The other two student participants were one senior male and one junior female dancer. I selected the male dancer, S-dawg, a former student of mine from a previous semester, for many of the same reasons I selected the focus group participants. Of all the members on the team, he was the only student I have directly taught in a course. Since my connection with S-dawg was already strong, his trust in me allowed him to be more at ease and more willing to share more personal and intimate details about his relationship with dance from a young male perspective during our one-on-one interview. After the interview, I asked S-dawg to recommend a third dancer who he believed could contribute to further my understanding of the *Mosaic Dance Team*. His recommendation and my subsequent selection of a female Grade 8 dancer, TJ, allowed for a diverse representation of genders, grade levels and cultural backgrounds in the demographic of the three dancer participants for my study. Additionally, I solicited the two sponsor teachers of the dance team so I could understand how they see the students engaging with hip hop and dance.

4.9. *Taggin' the Rappers*:
Recruiting the Rap Group Participants

Access Denied is a hip hop rap group/program founded in 2003 by a new teacher to *Mosaic High*. The name *Access Denied* is purposely ironic, as it symbolizes that even though the world is full of obstacles and challenges where people are denied equity and justice, one can confront injustice and seek to break down barriers. *Access Denied*'s mission statement on its Website is as follows:

- All forms of racism, prejudice, and discrimination should be confronted accordingly and abolished.
- Everyone should be given a chance to succeed in whatever they are doing.
- The best way to make a change is by getting up and making that change. Talking about it without being about it, doesn't help anyone.

- Music can change the world...or at least change people living in that world.
- THERE ARE NO BAD PEOPLE, ONLY BAD CHOICES.

(accessdenied.me)

Access Denied was first established in the sponsor teacher's (Mr. Irshad), previous school to offer a safe space for at-risk students to write and perform hip hop, while strengthening their Language Arts literacy skills in the process. *Access Denied* was also a reaction to the bullying and violence he saw escalating at school. This out-of-school hours program allowed the students a venue to channel their frustration, anger and conflict by creating rap and music that spoke to their immediate lived experiences and concerns. *Access Denied* is also about addressing the students' concerns with issues of racism, prejudice and discrimination. *Access Denied* became so popular, resonating with both at-risk students as well as the general student body, that it spawned a heavily visited Website and a number of hip hop events that became integral to the culture of this teacher's former school.

Mr. Irshad saw a need for such an initiative at *Mosaic High* and established it there in 2009. He hoped that would produce the same kinds of success stories he witnessed earlier. This came about through a chance meeting with one of his students at *Mosaic High*, who noticed a newspaper clipping hung on the classroom wall chronicling the success of *Access Denied* at the other school. Kalvonix, who has Cerebral Palsy, wrote about his struggles and challenges through his own original raps. He and Mr. Irshad bonded through their love for rap and hip hop, ultimately founded *Access Denied* at *Mosaic High*. News spread through word of mouth as well as personal and family connections and four more members joined the group. With the support and assistance of their sponsor teacher, the five member group committed its lunch and after school hours to writing, collaborating, producing, recording and performing its own original songs.

When *Access Denied* produced its first official recording, Mr. Irshad sent the music file to the whole *Mosaic High* staff via email. The recording, which was heavily inspired and influenced by the current hip hop sounds, such as the raw rap lyrics, catchy singing hooks and danceable beats resonated well with both staff and eventually the greater student body. The message behind the song was about overcoming struggles,

an anthem of sorts for youths to embrace their agency. When I approached Mr. Irshad to get more details about the recording and the group, he enthusiastically agreed to be interviewed for my research. He arranged for me to interview Kalvonix, who was anointed lead rapper of *Access Denied*. While he was not one of my students at the time of the interview, I did teach Kalvonix the following semester. He suggested that I interview one of the female members of the group, TJ, who was his cousin and a research participant from the *Mosaic Dance Team*.

4.10. *Taggin' the Other Homies and Shawties*: Recruiting the Other Participants

The remaining four participants in my study were not directly affiliated with the focus group, *Speak*, *Access Denied* nor with the *Mosaic Dance Team*. Joy was a recent graduate of *Mosaic High*, whom I had never taught. However, when I interviewed Babs for *Speak*, he recommended Joy to me because he was well known for his talents in writing poetry and rap. When Babs described my research to Joy, he was eager to be a part of it.

Complicity was the girlfriend of Joy at the time, as well as my former student from the previous semester. She was also instrumental in helping me to arrange a meeting time with her boyfriend. She initially wanted to participate as a member of the focus group, but her name was not selected during the lottery. I had informed all the students who were not chosen to speak to me if they were still interested in being involved with my research in some way. Complicity took up my offer and asked to be interviewed about her experiences with hip hop from a young woman's perspective.

STC became interested in being part of my research when I first presented it briefly to my classes. However, she was not keen on participating in the focus group nor being individually interviewed. Through an email correspondence, she articulated her passion for writing rap, especially as a way to vent her frustrations and express her opinions on a variety of subjects. Attached to her correspondence were some original raps she contributed to me and my research. Unlike many of the participants, she was never directly interviewed, individually nor collectively. Rather her rap artefacts serve to

demonstrate the way in which she used hip hop writing as a way to come to understand her identity.

Finally, Daniel James is a talented musician/guitarist/song writer from *Mosaic High* who was invited to and performed at the prestigious Carnegie Hall. He is a member of a Rock/Alternative touring band that has a recording on the market. He is also an avid lover of a variety of music genres with a breadth of music knowledge that is quite impressive. Daniel James, also a former student of mine from the previous semester, would always seem to find ways to write about music whenever a written composition was assigned in my Language Arts class. Thus, with such a breadth and depth of music knowledge, including an extensive understanding of hip hop and its place in the music pantheon, I solicited his assistance by recruiting him for an individual interview, which he willingly and enthusiastically agreed to do.

4.11. *Gimme the Low Down*:
Chapter Summary

This chapter contextualized the research by situating it in an interpretive epistemology consistent with qualitative research design. In particular I explicated my rationale for choosing and using case study as the most appropriate approach for gathering data to answer my research questions.

Since case study requires extensive contextualization, I proceeded to provide details about the setting, *Mosaic High*, chronicling the secondary school's history, surrounding community and current demographics. I continued by profiling both the student and teacher participants. I concluded by describing the recruitment of participants associated with the various hip hop venues in the school, as well as others who were interested in hip hop in general.

The next chapter describes the fieldwork stage, more specifically the data collection strategies.

5. *In Da Streetz*:
Fieldwork

"In da streetz" is an urban phrase referencing happenings that are occurring outside the home, where all the "action" lies. "In da streets" is where one will find the vibrant social scene, the "hippest" people and the latest trends.

In the previous chapter I contextualized the research by presenting the epistemological framework I adopted and explaining why case study methodology is appropriate for addressing my questions that examine how students take up hip hop at school. It also provided a detailed description of the research site and the participants. In this chapter, I describe the research strategies I employed during the fieldwork stage of this study. I begin by describing how data were gathered from both individual and group interviews, the latter in the form of a focus group comprised of students. I then proceed to explain how a series of formal observations were also conducted from a number of hip hop venues at *Mosaic High*, including *Speak*, the *Mosaic Dance Team* and *Access Denied*. I go on to show how artefacts, such as audio and video recordings, Websites and blogs, and rap lyrics and other written documents, all helped to contribute to an even fuller understanding of the complexity of the world of hip hop in the lives these of young people. I also describe how I recorded impressions in my research journal as part of a pre-analysis/interpretation of the data being collected. This chapter concludes with some considerations of how the data were analyzed and interpreted.

5.1. *Spittin' Words*:
Interviewing

When individuals engage in the act of verbalizing their thoughts and ideas, they are doing what hip hop linguists call "spittin' words.""Spittin' words" back and forth is essentially dialoguing.

Yin (2009) explains that because case studies are usually about human affairs, interviews are essential sources of data collection. Whether it was individual or group interviews, my central reason for selecting this approach can best be summed up as follows:

> I want to understand the world from your point of view. I want to know what you know in the way you know it. I want to understand the meaning of your experience, to walk in your shoes, to feel things as you feel them, to explain things as you would explain them. Will you become my teacher and help me understand? (Spradley, 1979, cited in Hatch, 2002, p. 91)

Since I taught the majority of the participants for my research, it was vital for me to impress upon my former students that during the interview session, they are, as Spradley aptly frames it, "the teachers" and I am the student eager to learn from their experiences and their expertise. Likewise, I selected to conduct semi-structured interviews because they lend themselves to shifting full control of the interview process from the interviewer to a more shared control with the interviewee. Silverman (2006) explains that semi-structured interviews encourage probing and engaging/connecting with the informant.

5.2. *Dawg We Gotta Talk Some Buziness*:
One-on-One Interview

"Dawg we gotta talk some buziness." Translation: "Hey, let's sit down and discuss." This hip hop expression is a friendly invitation to a one-on-one conversation.

One of the luxuries in education that is becoming less and less of a reality for practicing teachers is the opportunity to devote a significant portion of class time to speak with students individually, particularly in a secondary school context where four sets of approximately thirty different students file in each day for about an hour and a half at a time, before the new set replaces them the following semester – year after year. Compounding the difficulty of connecting with individuals is the ever-increasing number of students per class since classroom size provisions were revoked by the BC government in recent years. In fact, most secondary school teachers are responsible for over 200 students a year. Thus, when I individually interviewed many of my students for this study, I did so acutely aware of the luxury and privilege of being able to devote time to sitting down with each person for a meaningful one-on-one conversation in depth that would otherwise be impossible during a regular class period. The same can be said about spending time with the colleagues I interviewed for my study. In a secondary school housing 1500 students with over 90 staff members and several departments scattered across the campus, the extent of most collegial conversations involves a quick "How are you?" Contrary to Creswell's (2007) claim that "conducting interviews is taxing," my experiences interviewing my students and colleagues were enjoyable and provided me with deeper insights into their experiences that normally would be difficult to find out about during an average school day.

In total, I conducted 15 semi-structured individual interviews for my research, 10 of which involved students and 5 with teachers. Each interview lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes, and was audio recorded and transcribed. As recommended by Hatch (2002), the majority of the interviews were conducted in the safe, familiar and comfortable surroundings of my classroom. Most of the interviews were conducted during lunch hour, as it was the most feasible time for the students and teachers during their busy school day. The exceptions were the two teacher interviews that were conducted during teachers' preparation blocks, either in an empty prep room or unoccupied staffroom. Since the three recent graduates of *Mosaic High* who were involved with *Speak*, had a number of other commitments, I arranged for all of us to meet in a restaurant first, where sitting together, I individually interviewed each pioneer one at a time about his involvement with *Speak*. After we finished our meal at the restaurant, the interviews continued and concluded at a neighbouring coffee shop.

Although the semi-structured interviews tended to be dictated partially by the interests of the participants, there were nevertheless, research questions grouped into themes that I used to orient the discussion. These themes included exploring participants' understanding of (a) race, (b) identity, (c) social agency, and (d) hip hop, as well as examining pedagogical potentials found in the hip hop realm they embody. Questions were also adapted to the particular hip hop venue the participants originated from. For example, the participants of *Speak* were asked to articulate their philosophical vision behind the Poetry Slam event, how they brought it to life and how they came to better understand the themes I identified above. The teachers were asked about the reasons for their involvement with *Speak* and how they see this venue connecting to their own classroom teaching and other pedagogical potentials influenced by this hip hop form. The *Mosaic Dance Team* sponsor teachers were also questioned in a similar fashion, but of course from a hip hop dance perspective. The interview with the *Mosaic Dance Team* participants focused on how the elements of dance, choreography and movements to urban beats, which are also core to hip hop, informed their understanding of the research themes. In regards to *Access Denied*, the sponsor teacher was invited to chronicle and detail the rap group/program's inception, philosophy, development and aspirations. The *Access Denied* participants were interviewed about their reasons for joining the group and the roles they played. Other participants not directly connected to one of hip hop initiatives at *Mosaic High* were individually interviewed about their personal hip hop writings, their experiences and perspectives on the impact of hip hop on their lives and the lives of their peers (see Appendix B).

5.3. *Roundin' Up the Homies and Shawties*: Focus Group Interview

"Roundin' up the homies and shawties" is a hip hop expression for gathering like-minded individuals together for some form of social gathering, usually for a party, event or outing. At these gatherings, the central purpose is to interact in conversation with those in the group.

Focus group interviews were used to complement the data collected from individual interviews. Focus groups allow for interactions between the members that help

to redistribute the power within the group, rather than just centralizing it with the interviewer. The greatest strength of the focus group methodology is that research participants have the opportunity to engage and dialogue in co-construction of meaning and understanding with each other as well as the researcher (Morgan, Fellows & Guevara, 2008; Bryant, 2007; Stewart, Shamdasani & Rook, 2007; Scott & Morrison, 2006; Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005; Kleiber, 2004; Morgan, 2004, 2002, 1998; Hatch, 2002; Kitzinger & Barbour, 1999).

Once the eight participants were randomly identified, I contacted the students via email, notifying them that they had been selected for the focus group. After all consent forms were signed by both the participants and their parents, the next challenge was attempting to coordinate the sessions to accommodate the students' varying and busy schedules. The consensus among the members was that lunch hours in my classroom would be the ideal time and place to gather because of their various after school hour commitments. We initially planned to meet on two lunch hours per week, on Wednesdays and Thursdays, over a two week period; each lunch hour session was approximately 45 minutes in duration. However, it became apparent during the third session that the participants had more to contribute than was possible in the allocated time frame. Thus with all students in agreement, another two sessions were scheduled; the fourth session was another lunch hour in my classroom while the fifth session took place at a local restaurant during a semester turnover day when classes were not in session. This 2.5 hour final meeting allowed for more casual conversations over a meal at lunch, with a few loose ends tied up, as well as an opportunity for reflection and closure for all the participants. The 6 total focus group sessions, which stretched over a three week period, were attended by all members, except one who was unfortunately involved in a motor vehicle accident after the first meeting, preventing her from attending the remaining sessions. On a few occasions, one additional member would be missing for various reasons, such as illness or confusion over the schedule. However, at least six members were always in attendance for each of the six scheduled sessions. Each focus group session, aside from the final meeting location at a restaurant, took place in my classroom.

Similar to individual interviews, each focus group session concentrated on the key research themes: (a) race, (b) identity, (c) social agency, and (d) hip hop, and

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explored the pedagogical potentials of hip hop. Once a discussion question was posed by me or another member, one participant would respond first before others chimed in agreeing, contesting, elaborating, questioning and/or redirecting. Although I anticipated that certain members might dominate the discussion, the group dynamics were rather well balanced in the sense that although some members spoke more than others, no member overshadowed the discussion or was silenced. My role was to help guide the discussion around the research themes and offer clarification when required.

In addition to discussion questions connected to the core research themes, I incorporated visual and audio prompts. Scott and Morrison (2006) explain that the use of video, audio, photographs, charts, diagrams, short readings and other prompts can complement researcher questions and help encourage discussion during focus group interviews. I included multi-media, such as hip hop audio recordings, music videos and lyrics and photographic images from CD covers/booklets during a number of the focus group sessions. While the students are already bombarded with such multi-media in their daily lives, they are not afforded many opportunities to critically discuss the images and content they see and hear. The focus group sessions provided them a safe space to closely analyze these sounds and images and offer their responses to them.

One of the unexpected outcomes of the focus group was the bond students quickly formed during the relatively short period they spent with each other. This contributed to their willingness and enthusiasm to add additional sessions not originally slated for this research. Our last session at the restaurant focused more on the transformative aspect of participating in critical discussions about hip hop with peers and was motivated by the need to bring about a formal closure to the focus group as a way to honour the relationships and connections students made with each other.

5.4. *Got Ur Back*:
   ## Observation

"Got ur back" literally means, "I'm looking out for you." Essentially, one would use this expression to communicate willingness to assist and support a friend, especially if that peer is entering a challenging situation. For example, if a friend is planning on

fighting a foe, "got ur back," means, "I'll watch to make sure that no one attacks you from behind." In essence, the expression suggests that an extra pair of eyes will be there to oversee the situation.

Even though the focus group and individual interviews helped to illuminate the many ways hip hop discourses intersect with students' lives in and outside the school, I was also curious to witness first-hand how these students *do* the hip hop they speak about. Yin (2009) explains that in case study, observations of the setting play an important role in shedding light on the context of the study. LeCompte and Preissle (1993) argue that through observation, the researcher seeks to understand how participants make sense of and define their social reality, as well as the way their world is socially organized. LeCompte and Preissle add that observations are usually done in conjunction with interviews and/or artefact and document collection. Scott and Morrison (2005) suggest that observations also permit the researcher to assess to what extent the participants enact what they espouse during the interview.

Before formal observations were conducted in all three sites [*Speak*, the *Mosaic Dance Team* and *Access Denied*], I spoke to the teachers first, detailing my research intentions and my hope to observe these groups in their meeting space. Once the initial permission was granted by all the teachers, I then requested the students' permission to access their community, which was granted unanimously. The duration of most of the observations was approximately 45 minutes in length when they were conducted at *Mosaic High*, usually at lunch time and occasionally after school. Observations conducted off campus, such as when the students performed in various community events, lasted for about 3 hours. The following paragraphs detail other particulars of my observations within each of the hip hop venues at *Mosaic High*.

In total, eight observations were conducted for *Speak*, which included two planning meetings, four rehearsal gatherings and two performance evenings (see Table 5.1). In addition to the two sponsor teachers of *Speak* who were individually interviewed for this research as noted previously, I also volunteered to assist in supervising and sponsoring the meetings. Although *Speak* is a student led/run initiative, I volunteered my classroom at lunch hour for meetings and was on hand on a number of occasions when the students met to organize the event. As such, I conducted observations of two

planning meetings, where my participation was very limited. I only interacted with the students when there were logistical questions needing answers. These observations focussed primarily on how the students formulated their philosophical vision as well as how they organized the pragmatics of advertising and mounting the event. Particular attention was paid to the group dynamics of the student volunteers as they negotiated the challenges of putting together such a highly anticipated school event.

When I was re-invited to compose and perform a new original hip hop piece for the latest *Speak* event, I recruited seven *Mosaic High* students who were interested in collaborating on a piece with me. Thus, during the four rehearsal times we met during lunch time and after school, I shifted my role to a direct participant to brainstorm ideas, plot the concept, write the rap lyrics, practice and polish the performance. This more active participation allowed me a bit better access to some of the social reality of the students and experience first-hand how young people experiment with their racial and cultural identities through satirical rap form and imagery. My full membership afforded me the privilege to participate in the students' use of humour and hip hop as a tool for social resistance against the cultural stereotypes that have marginalized them.

The two other observations were conducted at both the 2009 and 2010 *Speak* events held each spring at *Mosaic High*. At these events, I was both a researcher and direct participant, as I was a performer in both shows, as well as an observer in the audience and behind the stage. As a performer, I was given access to the community of the other student performers, experiencing first-hand what it was like to wait nervously backstage, perform in front of over 300 people, bask in the applause and enjoy the encouragement offered by the community of performers, organizers and supporters of *Speak*. As a sponsor of the event, I was able to witness the challenges associated with mounting this student-driven production. As an audience member, I was able to witness and experience the power of young people who took risks to share some of their most personal thoughts with a large group of strangers and the impact they had on all present in the theatre hall.

Table 5.1.   *Observation Record of Speak*

Observation Name	Duration	Level of Involvement
Planning Meeting	45 minutes	Limited

Observation Name	Duration	Level of Involvement
Planning Meeting	45 minutes	Limited
Group Rehearsal	45 minutes	Active
Group Rehearsal	45 minutes	Active
Group Rehearsal	45 minutes	Active
Group Rehearsal	60 minutes	Active
Speak Event 2009	180 minutes	Semi-Active
Speak Event 2010	180 minutes	Semi-Active

Observations of the *Mosaic Dance Team* consisted of four sessions in which I slowly shifted from an outside observer with no direct contact with the participants near the beginning of fieldwork to a more active role in engaging with the students near the end (see Table 5.2). For the first few observations, I did not initiate direct communication with the participants, but did interact a bit with them when they "made the first move." This was particularly true in the first session, where I observed the auditioning process. Here, I was primarily interested in seeing what kinds of students audition for the *Mosaic Dance Team* and what kinds of dance forms and music genres are popular with these dancers.

The second session was an observation of a typical dance rehearsal. This rehearsal involved preparing for an upcoming dance competition. Again, I was predominantly an observer and only interacted with the dancers if they initiated any communication. What I was most curious about discovering here was how students expressed themselves specifically through hip hop dance and if there were similarities and differences in the ways the male and female students engaged with dance. I also paid particular attention to the kinds of moves, gestures, postures and attitudes that emerged when the students practiced their hip hop routines.

For the third observation, I followed the *Mosaic Dance Team* to its first competition at a local dance festival. Because many of the dancers became more and more accustomed to my presence, my involvement level increased with each observation, particularly on the competition day, as the students were anxious to share their nervousness, fear and excitement with me. Before leaving for the competition, I

was present with the dancers at *Mosaic High* as they applied their makeup, adjusted their outfits and practiced their routine. During this time, I was able to wander around and informally chat with the students about how they were feeling, as well as offer words of encouragement. This kind of mingling with the dancers continued when we arrived at the dance festival as they waited in the backstage area for their performance slot. As an audience member, I was also able to observe and compare the different kinds of dance forms and groups of dancers competing at the festival with the *Mosaic Dance Team*. And of course, I was also able to witness the *Mosaic Dance Team* in action as they impressed the judges and audience with their energy-packed hip hop number. I concluded the observation of the dance competition by speaking with the dancers backstage after their performance, congratulating them on their efforts.

The final observation, which was not initially scheduled, came about when one of the dancers, who was a former student of mine and who was also individually interviewed for this research, offered to teach me hip hop moves. As a participant at this dance tutorial, I learned and attempted to reproduce the same kinds of hip hop moves that I first witnessed at the auditions, rehearsal and dance competition.

Table 5.2.   *Observation Record of the Mosaic Dance Team*

Observation Name	Duration	Level of Involvement
Dance Audition	120 minutes	Limited
Dance Rehearsal	120 minutes	Semi-Active
Dance Performance	180 minutes	Semi-Active
Dance Tutorial	45 minutes	Active

Like the way I slowly eased myself into the *Mosaic Dance Team* community, my four observations of *Access Denied* were also conducted in a similar fashion (see Table 5.3). My first observation occurred very shortly after *Access Denied* was invited by the Vancouver 2010 Winter Olympics Committee to perform at a local venue in Yaletown that showcased local talent for world visitors. During this observation, the hip hop group members, along with their teacher, were frantically preparing for the biggest performance of the students' lives. I watched how they collaboratively experimented with hip hop beats and lyrics to communicate their message of hope and change for a better

world. They tirelessly worked and reworked sequences, doing it all with devotion, conviction and passion. Thus, my first observation focused on *Access Denied*'s process of hip hop music making as well as the way each member individually and collaboratively contributed to the production. As this process required trust, respect and support for one another, I was particularly conscious not to interfere with it, remaining as removed from the community as possible.

However, I engaged in fuller participation with the members of *Access Denied* when I attended their Olympics performance. Clearly nervous as they were about to perform on a world class stage, the students were relieved and pleased to see me as a familiar face from *Mosaic High*. That night, I aimed at communicating my encouragement and support, as well as to expressing how proud the *Mosaic High* community was of all of them.

During the third observation, I was privy to *Access Denied*'s debriefing of its Olympics performance experience. Here, I was simply an observer who listened and watched each member reflect on his or her life experience. At this meeting, the group planned its next performance for the *Mosaic High* community. Since only a very small handful of members of the *Mosaic High* community was in attendance at the Olympics, *Access Denied* decided to re-create the same performance for their peers.

The final observation was conducted in my classroom at *Mosaic High*. My English 11 class at the time was in the middle of a poetry unit focusing on social issues and social change through poetry and words. I invited members of *Access Denied* to perform one of their socially conscious hip hop pieces, explain the work they do, respond to questions from my students and most importantly, engage with them in discussion about the power of words, rhyme, rhythm and beats to communicate social message of change. Although I moderated the session with *Access Denied*, the majority of the discussion was managed by the students, both members of *Access Denied* as well as those in my English class.

Table 5.3. ***Observation Record of Access Denied***

Observation Name	Duration	Level of Involvement
Pre-Olympics Meeting	45 minutes	Limited

Observation Name	Duration	Level of Involvement
Olympics Performance	180 minutes	Semi-Active
Post-Olympics Meeting	45 minutes	Limited
Classroom Performance/Session	60 minutes	Semi-Active

I provided the opportunity for *Access Denied* members to share their knowledge further when I invited them subsequently to perform and discuss their hip hop pieces with a group of approximately 300 pre-service teachers at the University of British Columbia in the summer of 2010. My role as an instructor for this summer course allowed me the opportunity to showcase not only the talents and insights of *Access Denied*, but also introduce members of *Speak* and the *Mosaic Dance Team* who were invited to participate in an interactive guest session on the pedagogical potentials of hip hop with future teachers in BC. While I acted as moderator for the two hour session, which allowed me to interact on one level, I was able to step back and observe how the three *Mosaic High* hip hop venues came together and complemented each other, modelling hip hop at work.

5.5. *The Bling*: The Artefacts

"Bling" is the hip hop colloquialism for jewellery or any type of accessory. They are expensive trinkets or ornaments meant to complement and embellish one's overall fashion style and financial status. They are the finishing tangible pieces to one's ensemble.

Because *Speak*, the *Mosaic Dance Team* and *Access Denied* are unique hip hop cultural hubs within *Mosaic High*, each site has not only delivered inspiring and riveting performances by its committed members, it has also produced its own cultural artefacts (see Table 5.4). LeCompte and Preissle (1993) describe artefacts as "material manifestations" that reveal " people's sensations, experiences, and knowledge and which connote opinions, values, and feelings," (p. 216) and can assist in giving researchers a deeper understanding of the cultural site from which these artefacts

originate. Some of the common types of artefacts collected for this research include student produced writings (see Appendices C-F), such as rap lyrics and poetry, as well as a number of digitally based items. Being that these students are of the "broadcast thyself" generation, YouTube clips were abundant from all the hip hop venues at *Mosaic High*. Holm (2008) argues that more inclusion of visually based artefacts in studying a group of people can help to paint a clearer picture of the daily realities of a cultural group. In particular, Hine (2008) advocates exploring the visually rich Internet world "as new phenomena to study and opportunities for development of new techniques and new forms of engagement with research participants" (p. 526). Rapping, dancing and slamming are exhibited and archived by students themselves as well as spectators of *Speak*, the *Mosaic Dance Team* and *Access Denied* for all to see, respond and comment on the world wide web. Web and blog sites also documented some of the participants' works. LeCompte and Preissle (1993) note that artefacts may be personal or public. All artefacts collected from the sites and the participants are meant to be shared publically. Nevertheless, participants were still asked to sign over consent to include their artefacts in this research. Yin (2007) explains that artefacts and documents that complement other modes of data collection such as interviews and observations help the researcher better understand the overall case being studied.

Table 5.4.   List of Collected Artefacts and Documents

Speak	The *Mosaic Dance Team*	*Access Denied*	**Other**
Student & teacher rap lyrics & spoken word pieces Event programs DVD Performances YouTube clips	Dance competition program YouTube clips	Student rap lyrics Newspaper articles TV recording CD recordings DVD of Olympics performance Website YouTube clips	Various student writings Student Internet Blog

Finally, I kept a researcher journal to archive my field notes and chronicle various details that emerged throughout the data collection process. Eisenhardt (2002) describes field notes as "a running commentary to oneself or…an ongoing stream-of-

consciousness" (p. 15) about what is transpiring during the research process. The research journal has a number of pragmatic and theoretical functions, allowing the researcher to record his or her "'experiences, ideas, fears, mistakes, confusions, breakthroughs, and problems that arise during fieldwork' (Spradley, 1980, cited in Hatch, 2002, p. 87). Unlike conducting research in a team with colleagues, research conducted by a sole researcher can be an isolating experience on a number of fronts. My research journal allowed for an internal dialogue of sorts where I was able to tease out issues that arose from the data collecting process. It offered a significant moment of pause for reflection, something that Hatch argues is one of the strengths of keeping a research journal.

This was particularly useful since I amassed quite a large set of data from the numerous individual and group interviews, the various observations and artefacts. My research journal allowed me to engage with these data in the preliminary stages of analysis and interpretation that proved to be beneficial in the latter stages of the study. Critical details that would have otherwise been lost because audio recordings were unable to capture them or I would not have remembered, were preserved throughout my research journal. For example, even though all individual and group interviews were audio recorded, I jotted down pertinent notes on the participant's body language, facial expressions and other inconsistencies and/or abnormalities that may or may not offer further insight into the responses of the interviewees. Because I refrained from video recording the interviews, my research journal offered another lens. Perhaps most importantly, the research journals offered a self-assessment tool as a way to unpack personal biases in fieldwork, analysis and interpretation of data (Hatch, 2002).

5.6. *For Reals?*:
Data Analysis and Interpretation

When one questions the credibility and validity of something, one asks, "For reals?" "For reals?," with or without the "s" at the end of "real," is a hip hop expression used in response to something that seems incredulous or to inquire about something's merit or legitimacy.

Yin (2009) points out that one of the greatest concerns regarding case study methodology is its perceived lack of rigour, a claim that Yin disputes, particularly if researchers engage in a thorough analysis and interpretation of the data collected. Most writers of case study methodology, such as Yin, Creswell (2007) and Stake (2005), concur that the data analysis stage is a lengthy and at times tedious endeavour, requiring researchers to thoroughly sift through large amounts of data. As such, the analysis stage begins early in the research process, where the line between the data collection stage and the data analysis/interpretation stage is blurred. The research journal I kept throughout the data collection phase is evidence of how I engaged in pre-formal data analysis and interpretation. Creswell describes this overlapping approach as a *data analysis spiral*, where "The process of data collection, data analysis, and report writing are not distinct steps in the process – they are interrelated and often go on simultaneously in a research project" (p. 150).

Although there is not necessarily a linear approach to data analysis/interpretation, there are a number of key steps required in order to ensure a thorough investigation of the data collected. Creswell (2007) suggests a few pragmatic as well and theoretical approaches to help researchers manage their extensive and bulky data. First, Creswell, as well as many of his peers, insists on the need to read and re-read all transcripts in their entirety to see the data as a whole before deconstructing it. Not only did I heed to Creswell's advice, I also listened and re-listened to the digital recordings of all the individual and group interviews as well as re-examined the observation notes, for this helped me to remember what transpired as well as prompted new understandings.

In the initial stage of coding, I organized data under the following more general thematic umbrellas related to my research questions: the participants' understanding of (a) race, (b) identity, (c) social agency and (d) hip hop. I also organized the responses according to the hip hop venue/source in which the data originated – individual interviews, focus group interviews, *Speak*, the *Mosaic Dance Team* and *Access Denied*. From there, I highlighted similarities of responses to the research themes across the various groupings of data sources, as well as indicated conflicting and particularly unique/striking views. Next, I examined overlaps within each umbrella theme as they intersected. As Creswell (2007) recommends, I also "winnowed" some of the data that

would not necessarily help to inform my research inquiry, allowing me to focus my attention on the more pertinent pieces gathered.

After analysing the transcripts from the individual and group interviews, I turned my attention to examining the observations of the three distinct hip hop venues at the research site, *Speak*, the *Mosaic Dance Team* and *Access Denied*. Similarly to the way I approached the transcripts, I first looked at the uniqueness of each hip hop venue. I then proceeded to make connections between what was observed in each site as they linked to my research themes. Then I focused on the overlapping concepts from all three venues, as well as their capacity to complement, confirm, inform and/or contradict what was "said" by the participants. Following a similar analytical approach, I also studied the artefacts, such as student writings, audio and video recordings, and other various documents pertinent to the participants and/or hip hop venues, as a way to further illuminate what was extracted from the sets of interviews and observations.

My approach to the interpretation of the analyzed data was guided by Gerson and Horowitz's (2002) recommendation for researchers to "step back and seek the shape of the forest amid the trees" (p. 216). Whereas the data analysis stage of research is the piecing of the various elements of a story together in order to create a lucid narrative that represents the voices of the participants, the data interpretation for me was about figuring out what the point of the story is and how my understanding of the story can better inform educators, researchers and pedagogy about how students make meaning through their hip hop.

Yin (2009) stresses that any conclusion drawn from a case study is only convincing if the rigorousness of case methodology is followed. Specially, Yin points to the need to use multiple data sources, a keystone of case study, as one significant way to increasing the degree of validity in the findings. My research rigorously employed both individual and group interviews, observations and artefact/document studies from 28 participants composed of both students and teachers of diverse backgrounds throughout a cross section of venues within the research site.

Eisenhardt (2002) also recommends researchers compare findings to the literature, noting the similarities and paying particular attention to the contradictions.

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Eisenhardt goes on to suggest the need for multiple researchers as another way to further verify the data collected. However, the constraints of a doctoral thesis, based on the research and writing competency of a single candidate, does not allow for such a collaborative engagement.

Nevertheless, I attempted to circumvent this obstacle by enlisting the collaboration of all the participants and giving them access to their transcripts, observation notes and my writings on the analysis and interpretation of data. More importantly, they were encouraged to expand, clarify, modify, question, edit, revise and even delete any detail they deemed insufficient and/or inaccurate. After all, who best to validate the findings than those who offered the data in the first place? However, only two students and one teacher actually returned documentation with revisions. I surmise the low return in edited documents is because of the participants' lack of time. Because I did not want to further impose on them, I looked for other ways to engage with the participants about the accumulated data. For the teacher participants, it was not difficult to dialogue about the research findings during our lunch gatherings, much like we would normally do about various educational issues that arise in our daily teaching anyway. These unstructured conversations over our meals allowed me to hear their reactions to the data, giving me a greater degree of understanding as to how they saw them. For many of the student participants, these kinds of informal conversations also occurred whenever they would drop by to "hang out" in my classroom or when I would bump into them in the hallway or at school events and gatherings. For the students who graduated, I conversed with them whenever they returned to the school to visit or when they invited me to one of their engagements. For some, our conversations occurred online as well as through cellular phone chatting and texting. These conversations with both students and teachers, although casual and informal in many ways, were vital to making sure the participants were satisfied with their responses.

5.7. *Gimme the Low Down*: Chapter Summary

This chapter focused on describing the research strategies I employed during my fieldwork. A description of both individual and group interview methodology was given,

with particular attention to why and how I went about conducting interviews with the students and teachers of *Mosaic High*. I then explained how I conducted observations to complement and enrich the data I collected from the interviews. I described how these observations were conducted at various hip hop venues at *Mosaic High*: *Speak*, the *Mosaic Dance Team* and *Access Denied*. I showed how artefacts, such as audio and video recordings, Websites and blogs, and rap lyrics and other written documents further supported my understanding of how students make meaning from hip hop. I also noted the usefulness of my research journal for recording impressions and my initial analysis and interpretation of data.

This was followed by a more detailed account of how I approached the data analysis and interpretation stages, describing the guiding principles that helped me to frame my understanding of the data. The chapter concluded with some thoughts on how I revisited the data with the participants.

The following chapters will present an interpretation of the data according to thematic clusters described in the previous section.

6. *Peep This!*: Reproducing and Challenging Racial Identities

When one wants someone to take a look at something, the expression "peep this" is used. "Peep this" is considered an "old school" hip hop term that also means to request a closer investigation or analysis of something needing feedback or interpretation.

This first of two data analysis/interpretation chapters focuses on the students' understanding of how hip hop influenced and/or informed their perception of race and identity. Framed within a hip hop discourse, the students offered their perspectives on how race and identity operate in their personal lives as well as their school lives at *Mosaic High*.

When I introduced the topic of race in hip hop in both the focus group and individual interviews, one of the common themes that emerged was how some of the participants reproduced racial classification schemes in their understanding of racial identities. Some of these students conceived and articulated their understanding of racial identities by ascribing to the racial constructions of whiteness (Caucasian), blackness (Negro) and yellowness (Asian). But for some, they moved away from these prescribed racial identities to critically challenge these prescriptions.

6.1. Identity of the Oppressor and the Oppressed

In their deconstruction of what it means to be white, some students understood whiteness as a construction of contradictions. Some conceptualized the paradoxical roles of whiteness as both the oppressor and/or the oppressed.

As indicated in the excepts below, the negative portrayal of whites is popularized and to some extent legitimatized by the way it is expressed in hip hop culture. Two white male and female students, White Rice and Laura, described how their race is negatively portrayed in hip hop.

> Hip hop tends to say that white people are racists and oppressors. (White Rice – *Speak*)

> White people are given a very negative image in hip hop music. It stems from blacks being oppressed up until the Civil Rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s, which led some rappers to venting through music. (Laura – *Focus Group*)

According to White Rice, whites are merely the antagonists in hip hop mythology and are almost exclusively the "bad guys," or as he put it, "the racists and oppressors" in the hip hop storyline. This matter-of-fact tone seems to suggest that White Rice is familiar with this archetype. Although this portrayal of his race appeared unsettling for White Rice, rather than reacting to it with great indignation, which could make him vulnerable to being labelled a "typical" white racist or "oppressor," himself, he seemed resigned to accepting it. Laura also accepted this negative representation of her race in hip hop, which she situated in a historical context of white racism towards blacks. Even though both Laura and White Rice recognized that racism is indeed operating within hip hop discourse in a way that oppressed them as white people, their reluctance to challenge it speaks to how they were grappling with understanding race and racism, and how they fit into the discourses as white individuals.

The discussion centring on hip hop that led to the understanding of whiteness as the oppressor, prompted one of the students to recall a personal incident that supports this characterization of whites. Jay, a male student born in the Philippines, who initially believed that racism was something that happened "Centuries ago or even a couple of decades," recounted his encounter with a white bully to illustrate this definition of whiteness.

> I remember before I was in a fight and the white person tried to take my lunch money but he wouldn't take no for an answer and he kept pushing and shoving me. He started calling me racist remarks and without thinking my first act of defence was to talk back. Anyone would. I did call him some racist things that made the situation worse.

> I called that guy white trash and he was just doing this because he's white or just trying to be superior to me and stuff. (Jay – *Focus Group*)

Jay's account of being harassed by his peer was framed within the hierarchical conception of race, where white was trying to be "superior" and felt entitled to take Jay's lunch money. The white bully reminded Jay about his place on the racial hierarchy by taunting him with "racist remarks." But in this particular situation, Jay attempted to disrupt the hierarchy. Much like how those who participated in *carnival* (Bakhtin, 1984) turned the authoritative world upside-down, in referring to his bully's whiteness as "white trash" Jay challenged his subordinate position. However, the racial hierarchy was still restored, for Jay's challenge of his oppressor only "made the situation worse." The white bully ultimately reclaimed his oppressor status while Jay was again relegated to the role of the oppressed, surrendering his lunch money, pride and dignity in the process, much like the how temporary state of *carnival* ultimately reverts back to the authoritative order.

As indicated below, students' discussion of whiteness gravitated from representations of whiteness as oppressor, to ironically, whiteness as the oppressed, prone to being a target for racism. Although whites have traditionally been the perpetrators of racism, the students also viewed them as the target of racism too. In the case of hip hop in the United States, which claims the largest market share of this genre of music, hip hop continues to be practiced almost exclusively by black artists, with only a handful of white rappers ever achieving notoriety or commercial success. Eminem, a white rapper, is the most notable exception. Kalvonix, *Access Denied*'s lead rapper, picked up on this point and spoke about a kind of reverse racism he saw happening in hip hop.

> Due to the fact that the hip hop genre mostly catered and included the African American descent, when a white hip hop artist steps onto the scene, they deal with much controversy. For example, Vanilla Ice or Marky Mark all received tremendous criticism due to the fact they were white rap artists. I believe it wasn't until the 90s when Eminem found commercial success that white rap artists were truly accepted. At first many doubted Eminem's rap abilities due to his race, but once they heard him rap rhyme through rhyme and deliver amazing punch lines on top of a constant flow it was as if none of it mattered anymore for he proved himself a true lyricist which is what earned him a record deal with hip hop heavyweight Dr. Dre. (Kalvonix – *Access Denied*)

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As Cutler (2006) pointed out, white rappers, including Eminem to some degree, continue to be marginalized in mainstream hip hop today by the "normative Blackness" (p. 80). They have to justify their authenticity and prove their "street cred" because they do not come from the black ghettos of urban American centres.

The discussion on the marginalization of white rappers prompted Alan, a non-white student, to confess his racist view of his white peers at *Mosaic High* when he first arrived.

> I'm not going to lie but when I first came to Canada years ago I was racist pretty much towards white people. It had something to do with my family too and my parents were also racist to white people for a long time. When I first came to Canada my thought was basically, white people are lazy and stupid. That thought held on for a long time. I think it has a lot to do with my family but I think it was something to do with the shows in China too. So basically, during group projects in like Grade 9 when I had a white person in my group, I'm like, "Damnit! Now I'm gonna lose marks!" (Alan – *Focus Group*)

As referenced earlier when Jay referred to his bully as "white trash," white students at *Mosaic High* are certainly not immune to bouts of racism. Incidentally, both the white and non-white students reported that "white bashing" was common at *Mosaic High*.

But not all the white students willingly accepted their marginalization, whether it be at *Mosaic High* or in hip hop. Daniel James for example was the only white student who outwardly challenged the double standard in hip hop that condones the practice of presenting whiteness as "square," "inferior" and a justifiable target for violence.

> Hip hop presents whites as definitely being the "square" people in the whole kind of racial game—"square" is almost nerdy in a sense; very not--no street smarts--very "uncool." But their presentation of whites nowadays in rap music is that they are very inferior. To me racism is really anything that kind of presents an impressionable or negative image upon a race of people and you definitely see it in hip hop a lot nowadays from both sides. It's from the black side of things. It's definitely a lot of shots towards whites about not rapping and not having these street smarts and the usual things and you hear in some of the underground rap about killing whites and all this ridiculous stuff because they're white. I think it's really uncalled for, just because it's absolutely ridiculous when those exact same guys who are talking about killing whites and talking about just the most absurdly racist issues are going on and crying racism. And they wonder why people are making shots towards them and in a circumstance like this, they're

just bringing it on themselves by going and using that kind of subject matter and I don't think you can call it free speech when you're talking about killing somebody because of the colour of their skin. (Daniel James – *Individual Interview*)

While his other white peers were more reluctant to say that hip hop circulates racist rhetoric towards white people, Daniel James was not afraid to express his anger over the perpetuation of racism he saw transpiring. He identified one of the paradoxes of how hip hop on the one hand opposes racism in its music lyrics and videos, yet on the other hand incites the audience to be racist. He believed that hip hop artists lose all credibility when they attack whites. Daniel James was particularly disturbed by the racist violence circulated in hip hop art forms such as Gangsta Rap, which Dimitriadis (2001) pointed out is a form of "violent outlaw" hip hop utilized by black men as a venue to vent their hostility towards what they see as an unjust white ruling world.

6.2. Identity of the Unfortunate and the Undesirable

The conversations in the focus group interviews and individual interviews not only centred on the idea of whiteness, but they also delved into the students' notions of other racial categories as well. In this section, I examine how students reproduced and challenged the black racial identity. I explain that although some students were more informed and emphatic about the image of black people portrayed in hip hop, others were equally critical of hip hop for presenting blackness as an undesirable identity.

All the students recognized that blackness plays a central and important role in hip hop. Kim Park Chi, a male student of Korean ancestry, and White Rice, a student of European ancestry, believed that hip hop helps to shed light on the plight of black people historically and currently.

Hip hop says that all black people live a hard life and are all grown up in the ghettos. (Kim Park Chi – *Speak*)

The majority of mainstream hip hop says that black people are affiliated with violence, crimes, gangs, and that they are all victims of racism. (White Rice – *Speak*)

Hip hop can be a venue for illuminating and educating students about the social injustices and oppressions inflicted upon African Americans. Through the hip hop lens, Kim Park Chi, White Rice and other explained that they have become more informed about social issues and feel more empathetic towards the black community.

Not only does hip hop help understand what it might be like to be black, some high profile hip hop artists can help construct a representation of black identity that is associated with potential instead of hopelessness as Mytur, a male student of Vietnamese origins, explains:

> Lupe Fiasco, Kanye West and Jay-Z are able to revolutionize a positive outlook in the black community by writing inspirational lyrics as well as shifting mindsets. (Mytur – *Focus Group*)

However, not all the students were convinced that hip hop can help shed the negative images associated with the black identity. OJ, a young man of Somalian descent as well as the lone black student in the focus group, was sceptical about the way hip hop essentializes the black identity.

> Hip hop says that black people are only successful if they can rap, sing or play sports extremely well. And that if you're an educated black person you are trying to be like white people. (OJ – *Focus Group*)

Alan, who revealed that he was at one time racist towards his white peers, was also critical of hip hop's representation of the black identity. Contrary to the arguments advanced by Kim Park Chi and White Rice that young people become more informed about blacks through hip hop music, lyrics and videos, Alan suggested that hip hop's images of black people suffering reproduces the notion of black identity as inferior and cements the idea that white identity is "superior."

> I feel that hip hop has described the black people as one that is constantly bothered by violence, poverty, abuse and most of all, subdominant to the white people. This absence of expressing racial problems in white artists in a way shows that whiteness is superior to the blackness. (Alan – *Focus Group*)

Thus the fact that black artists delve into issues around race in their music while their white counterparts rarely have to mention anything about it, according to Alan, only

reaffirmed for him as well as some of his peers that "whiteness is superior to the blackness."

The most scathing critique of hip hop's fabrication of the black identity came from Daniel James, the student of mixed European background. Similar to his reaction to how the white identity is portrayed in hip hop, Daniel James was equally offended by how the black identity is marketed in mainstream hip hop.

> The rappers, clubbers, thugs and ballers heard about in modern rap songs appear to live lives far removed from the real-life problems faced by modern African-Americans, such as debt and dealing with the racial divide that is unfortunately still prevalent in today's society. Portrayed in popular hip hop/rap songs, "Gangstas" can often be found socializing at "da club," taking "shots" and bringing "shawtys" and "hoes" to their "cribs" with minimal effort. For example, listening or watching a MTV channel music videos, there's a 50 Cent video on where he's driving down the road in a Hummer or Escalade or something and he just whips out a handgun and guns somebody down. I think that's providing a message that, "Okay, this is the guy selling millions of albums--look at what he's doing. This guy is gunning people down on the corner--clearly something I should be looking into." (Daniel James – *Individual Interview*)

Daniel James saw beyond the illusionary trappings of what McBride (2007) described as the cliché hip hop video rap star who possesses great wealth, power, materialism and sexual prowess. Daniel James argued that hip hop was doing a disservice to the black community by selling a fictional persona of what it is to be a powerful black man, an image that he believed is inaccurate, counterproductive and even dangerous, particularly for youth who try to emulate their hip hop heroes.

Suey and Dee, two female students of Asian and South Asian descent, pointed out the juxtaposition of how the black male and the black female identities are constructed in hip hop. Whereas black women are predominantly objectified, sexualized and subordinated in mainstream hip hop, the construction of the black male identity on the other hand only further cements his place at the top of patriarchal hierarchy.

> Men and women are both presented in very different ways in hip hop. Men are seen as the powerhouse. They're all knowing and they boss people around. They can do whatever they want. Women, they're seen as--they're always degraded in hip hop and even if women aren't even mentioned in the song, usually in the music videos they're seen as

really sort of like models. They wear really skimpy outfits and they're always dressed up as nurses or maids and when you look at those types of professions they're supposed to help out the children of the world and instead they're looked at as sexual items that men can easily win over because of the amount of money that they have. It just doesn't make any sense. (Suey – *Focus Group*)

I think that most of the time women are degraded in songs and men are powerful--50 Cent, in his videos, you'll see that he's surrounded by all these women and he's considered a "pimp" but if you saw a girl with all these men, she's a whore? So it's kinda like--he's very like, how do you explain it? He's very sexist. I think that many times women are really looked at as the worse of the two sexes. (Dee – *Focus Group*)

As Dimitriadis (2001) pointed out, since men assume the production and distribution of most mainstream hip hop, they are able to fashion a hyperbolized masculinity of themselves that involves sexualizing and degrading women in the process. This hip hop male identity is also termed Gangsta/"violent outlaw" identity (Dimitriadis) or "cool pose" identity (Majors, 1999).

Although Suey, Dee and others, including some males, were vocally critical about hip hop's construction of black masculinity during our discussion, according to OJ and Dee, the majority of male students at *Mosaic High* would refrain from outwardly expressing their disapproval. Specifically, according to them, such a stance makes boys particularly susceptible to having their masculinity and sexuality scrutinized.

I think people start questioning your sexuality and they'd start calling you, "You're a fag, you're gay, why don't you like girls and stuff like that." It's just you don't want that, in high school especially. Cuz a lot of people don't like gay people and there are people who just try to stay away from them so who are you gonna hang out with? For me the reason why, to be honest--the reason why I'd be uncomfortable with it is I'd be afraid that I would be, you know, approached by a gay person and I don't know what they do and things like that and I kinda feel like, you know--as bad as it sounds I just don't wanna be--I don't want that gay person to think that I'm gay or anything like that. (OJ – *Focus Group*)

I don't think all guys are like, "Oh yea I wanna do that [exploit women]." I think somewhere it's like, "That's wrong." They just don't say it. I think that if guys were to go [against those images of girls in videos] they'd be questioned about their sexuality and I think that, that would be really bad because for them I think that would be the worst thing to happen in high school… I'm not comfortable with it. (Dee – *Focus Group*)

Consistent with the argument advanced by several authors (Fleras & Elliott, 2003; Yon, 2000; Dei, 1996; McIntosh, 1989) that heterosexuality is requisite for membership in the dominant culture, OJ and Dee were adamant that one's homosexuality or even perceived homosexuality at *Mosaic High* would mean one "would be isolated" and "would be alone," without anyone to "hang out with." Their assessment is consistent with Hill's (2009) argument that there is no place for the "queer" identity in hip hop. Homophobia is quite rampant at *Mosaic High*, which OJ attested to when he explained that a homosexual student would be called a "fag" because "a lot of people don't like gay people." Because homophobia is so pervasive within the student body, and the ramifications of social isolation are so tangible, students, particularly male students, can confirm and solidify their masculinity and heterosexuality by both embracing the hip hop construction of a hyperbolized black male identity as well as endorsing the distorted portrayal of the female counterpart.

The students' critique of how the black masculine identity is represented in hip hop led them to analyze the way blackness is viewed by those within the *Mosaic High* community. Cedric, a male student born in the Philippines, and Complicity, a female student born in Canada with Laotian roots, each described how they witnessed racism at work in their school, which contradicted many of the students' initial comments that it was "not a problem" and almost "non-existent." The following excerpts are their descriptions on how blackness is perceived by some students at *Mosaic High*.

> I have a lot of African-American friends as well and every time I hear some rude comments that people say, it just makes me think about what the world is going to be like. Well usually they just say, "Oh why are you so dark?" (Cedric – *Mosaic Dance Team*)

> People make fun of really dark people. They call them "crispy" or "Dang she's so dark or he's so dark--we can't even see them in the night time." I think it's really mean to make fun of someone's skin colour. Crispy means like burnt--like your skin colour is burnt so like you're really black. A lot of people make fun of really dark black people or just really dark people in general. I guess because being dark apparently isn't beautiful to people. It's [making fun] more behind their back. I don't really see people going up to them and saying, "Oh you're so crispy and go back to Africa." I don't see that happening. (Complicity – *Individual Interview*)

It is interesting to note that Cedric referred to his black peers as "African-American friends." This illustrates just how prevalent American discourse on race is within these Canadian students' conception of race and vocabulary around it, especially when they are speaking about the black identity. Both Cedric and Complicity pointed to the fact that blackness or any suggestion of blackness is generally *undesirable* (Fine, Weis & Powell, 1997) within the *Mosaic High* school setting. "Dark" and "crispy" are derogatory terms that are commonly used by *Mosaic High* students according to Cedric and Complicity, to mean abnormality, strangeness and even deviance (Foucault, 1997) or as Complicity phrased it, "apparently dark isn't beautiful to people."

The most contentious part of the students' discussion about the black identity revolved around how they situated themselves in their understanding of the "Nigger" identity. Although all the students acknowledged that the word Nigger was originally a prescribed identity forced upon black slaves by their white masters, not all of them conceptualized the Nigger identity as necessarily a bad thing. According to the students, hip hop rhetoric, vernacular, expressions and terms are commonly uttered by students throughout the halls and classrooms of *Mosaic High*, and they themselves use them. By far, the most ubiquitous and contentious hip hop influenced word in circulation at the school is the word Nigger. The students grappled with the multidimensional connotations of this word and its use in their own lives in and outside *Mosaic High*. What further complicates the already complex, confusing and contradictory nature of the word Nigger is the way it is used and popularized in the world of hip hop. The mass reproduction of the word Nigger through hip hop music, lyrics, raps and videos has resulted in its accessibility to youth and even its permissibility to be used in various social settings and situations.

On one end of the spectrum some students denounced any uttering of the word at all, as evident in the excerpts below.

> It is a shame to see black people resurrect this word and use it against each other. (Kim Park Chi – *Speak*)
>
> I completely disagree with its use. The overuse of profanity and the "N" bomb causes the words to mean less. (White Rice – *Speak*)
>
> Using the "N" word to me seems very primitive. In some books you would see this word but they were usually written a long time ago. The use of this word can cause a lot of damage because this word was

used to describe black people who were slaves back in the day. (Dee –
Focus Group)

Kim Park Chi, White Rice and Dee, who represent a diversity of genders and cultures such as Korean, European and East Indian, all expressed their indignation with the word Nigger, using words and phrasings such as "shame," "completely disagree," "primitive," and "can cause a lot of damage" to express their outrage and perplexity as to why anyone, let alone their peers at the school would even consider participating in such hateful rhetoric. For them, using the word Nigger is considered racist.

Daniel James, who was vocally critical of hip hop's portrayal of whites and blacks, was also particularly derisive in his assessment of how hip hop's use of the word Nigger acts to highlight and reaffirm the undesirability of the black identity in the eyes of what he referred to as "respectable" culture.

> I'm not racist. I have a lot of black friends. I spent some time in Harlem and had a lot of fun doing it but I find hip hop nowadays is presenting a very negative image. Not even in the violence sense, but even in the vocabulary. Actually Bill Cosby was doing a seminar, not a comic routine, but a seminar actually about language. I was reading the transcript from it. When all the black people as a whole, as a race, had been advancing so far and made so much progress with Civil Rights and everything, why reverse that? Why reverse that at this point? I don't think Obama--I don't think any respectable African-American individual is going to be or should be impressed by the jargon and the use of language in rap nowadays. Especially the one word that gets thrown around is of course Nigger and I think some blacks think it is totally acceptable because they're black that they can just throw around that word like it's nothing, but I think it is something. I think it does present something we need to be worried about because if something like that gets thrown around too easily then people just get the wrong idea and I really don't think it's a respectable kind of way of talking and it kind of sickens me to listen to some of the newer rap and hear how some of the people are talking. Knowing and having family friends that are totally respectable I just think it's sad that that's what a lot people are viewing as "black culture" nowadays. Obama made a statement about it too which I found kinda interesting because you get all these rappers going on like, "Black power! Obama is President!" Even Obama was saying that it's shockingly embarrassing to hear people speak the way they do nowadays in rap. (Daniel James – *Individual Interview*)

Essentially Daniel James forwarded the same argument Hikes (2004) made that hip hop contributes to the degeneration of the black identity and culture. For him, hip hop's

cavalier approach to the word Nigger discredits all the progressive work "respectable" black people, such as Obama and Bill Cosby, have accomplished to showcase the positive aspects of the black identity. It is interesting to note that he did not appear to see that the word Nigger originated in "standard" (white) English. Nevertheless, he believed that hip hop's appropriation of the word Nigger only acts to re-victimize and further marginalize the black identity.

Daniel James, Suey, Dee, Kim Park Chi and White Rice were in the minority in regards to their categorical denouncement of the use of the word Nigger. One of the participants, OJ, a student who identified himself as black, did not have a problem with it at all.

> I think the "N" word is appropriate because it was a word used towards black people and in their culture it is not seen as an offensive word. The only people who are upset about the use of the "N" word are white people who were the ones who first created the word so there is a bit of hypocrisy in the criticism. (OJ – *Focus Group*)

OJ spoke with an authoritative voice as an insider of black culture. When pressed further about why he was so tolerant of the word, OJ's response was, "Because the word doesn't carry the same connotation as it did when it was used during slavery." From OJ's perspective, most black people and most of his peers are not offended by the use of the word. His general attitude towards the word was that "it's no big deal" and that it certainly is not racist nor does it degrade the black identity. OJ's reasoning is consistent with Low (2011), Cutler (2009) and Alim's (2004) explanation that youth who are familiar with hip hop discourse understand the word Nigger much differently from its original derogatory connotation. These authors went on to argue that this redefinition by hip hop and youth has transform the word Nigger into something that depending on the context could be positive in meaning.

germME, a Canadian born Filipino male, and Mytur, who pointed out that famous hip hop figures can help to "revolutionize a positive outlook" on the black identity, had their own take on the use of the word Nigger. Although they did not support using the word, they accepted Nigga as a term.

> Nigger is seen as a derogatory term, while Nigga is a way for black people to communicate with each other. In fact Nigga is used by all races nowadays. (Mytur – *Focus Group*)

> I respect the "N" word. The reason being is because a person who uses it actually understands the definition behind it and when calling another person a Nigga, that person won't take it offensively because of the mutual connection. For example, if I were to call a person a Nigga it would be towards a good friend, someone close, someone who knows my history. If I were to call a total stranger a Nigga they would take it offensively because I'm a stranger to them. (germME – *Speak*)

germME and Mytur referenced the subtle but powerful shift in spelling to "Nigga" reshapes and strips the negative connotations associated with the Nigger identity. To them, a "Nigga" identity is one to be embraced, for it implies camaraderie and acceptance of both black and "all races nowadays."Their argument is consistent with Cutler's (2009) explanation that although "Nigg*er*" can also communicate the same kind of brotherly bond, "Nigg*a*" is the more conservative form that suggests a happy medium between using the word in its original form and abstaining from using it altogether. This argument parallels Dimitriadis' (2001) explanation that the word Nigger is often used to express camaraderie and solidarity, especially in Gangsta Rap, where one relies heavily on a "brother" to protect and support each other in the fight against the white man. germME seems to understand these nuances when he spoke about the contextual use of the word and how calling a peer a "Nigga" is a modern form of communication for youth to acknowledge and announce their friendship, fondness and connection with one another. However, germME was quick to caution that there are conditions attached to using the word. He explained that the recipient of the word must be his "good friend,""someone close [to him]" and "someone who knows [his] history." If these criteria are missing, then germME would agreed with Daniel James, Suey, Dee, Kim Park Chi and White Rice that the use of the "N" word would be offensive and racist, whether it be in the "*er*" or "*a*" form.

6.3. Identity of the Underrepresented and the Untapped

Since the majority of the participants in the research come from a wide variety of Asian backgrounds, they had much to say about the Asian identity at *Mosaic High*. Ironically, even though all the Asian students were drawn to some degree to hip hop,

they found a deficiency in the way the Asian identity is situated in the music and discourse. Rather than being resentful about their lack of presence and voice in mainstream hip hop, many of the students saw it as a opportunity to contribute to hip hop.

What was strikingly evident for the students was how absent the Asian identity was within the mainstream hip hop music they listen to. Although some of the students knew that Asian hip hop existed, they considered it more of a subplot to the mainstream hip hop storyline. Mytur, an Asian student, and Laura, a white student, echoed most of their peers' responses to how Asians are situated in mainstream hip hop.

> I've never heard a hip hop song that speaks about Asian people. (Mytur – *Focus Group*)
>
> I haven't heard much discussion in hip hop about Asians and other races. (Laura – *Focus Group*)

For many of the students, the absence or scant presence of Asians in mainstream hip hop mirrors how Asians and other races outside of the black and white dichotomy are usually situated in race discourse. In some ways, the Asian students are used to this form of exclusion from discussions of race and identity, which is also usually presented to them through a black and white lens. Thus, Kalvonix, an Asian rapper, was not surprised that "The media is still more focused on white and black rather than Asians and other races." Alan, the most recent immigrant from China, warned that the hierarchizing of race in hip hop discourse only acts to further marginalize an already disenfranchised Asian identity.

> Based on the publicity of the other races in the hip hop world, I would say that if you have to put the black, the white and the others on a pyramid, the others would go onto the bottom, because the others are simply ignored in hip hop world. (Alan – *Focus Group*)

As OJ and Kim Park Chi pointed out in the excerpts below, on the rare occasions that Asians are even mentioned in hip hop, their representation is often limited, stereotypical and generally negative.

> Hip hop says that Asians all own corner stores in lower class neighbourhoods. (OJ – *Focus Group*)

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Asians have it just as hard on the streets but have to deal with gangs and gang violence. (Kim Park Chi – *Speak*)

OJ and Kim Park Chi's assessment of how Asians are presented in hip hop echo the comments they made earlier regarding how black identities can also be presented in a negative light. Phrases such as "lower class neighbourhoods," "hard on the streets," and "gangs and gang violence" that they used to describe Asian representation in hip hop could easily be applied to how blacks are often portrayed.

In some ways the Asian and black experiences are similar here. Whereas blacks have to negotiate their Nigger identity, Asians have to grapple with their Chink identity. According to some of the students, this racial vernacular associated with the Chink identity is commonly used by them and their peers at *Mosaic High*. It shapes how Asian and non-Asian students understood the Asian identity. As will be shown in the following excerpt, Complicity and Suey, both of Asian background, explained that the word's general usage by the greater *Mosaic High* student body is often ammunition for further marginalizing Asian and sometimes even non-Asian students.

Like if someone drops their books, someone would yell out, "Open your eyes you stupid Chink!" or something like that. I see it all the time. (Complicity – *Individual Interview*)

My friend and I were talking on MSN and I'm not exactly sure what we were fighting about but it came to the point that she was calling racist comments about me and calling me Chink. She was like, "Hey what are you going to do about it Chink?" and all that stuff and every sentence pretty much had that word in it. Now personally to me the word doesn't offend me as much because it's a way of saying Chinese but it depends how you say it and the way my friend was saying it to me I found it really offensive because first of all this is supposed to be someone I talk to and hang out with. Instead this person is using that word in a bad way to sort of discriminate me with like saying I have small eyes and describing Asians in a bad way. (Suey – *Focus Group*)

At its root, "Chink" refers to the shape and size of Asian eyes, which according to the physical norms standardized by the white dominant culture, are perceived as deficient and defective. This kind of racial rhetoric is also used to explain and justify the argument that Asians are bad drivers or generally uncoordinated people. They need to "Open [their] eyes" even more than those with *normal* sized pupils. It is also a convenient and effective term to resort to when one needs to marginalize others, which was illustrated in

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Suey's recollection about her conflict with her friend on MSN. Although Suey explained "Chink" as a derogatory term "describing Asians in a bad way," she also acknowledged that the word is multifunctional, "depend[ing] on how you say it." Depending on the circumstances, the contextual unfolding of the particular moment, the specific individuals involved and their unique relationships and histories with one another (Kuoch, 2005), "Chink" can also be "a way of saying Chinese" and a way to express and strengthen camaraderie - the parallels to the word Nigger are evident here.

Even though the Asian identity is not referenced as directly and as often in hip hop, the many experiences of oppression suffered by both of these groups allow the black rap vocals to resonate with Asian experience. And even though there is little to no Asian representation in the mainstream hip hop students listen to, the Asian participants were still drawn to the overarching message found in the music. Perhaps because the umbrella themes of injustice, inequity and oppression found in hip hop discourse echo similar forms of suffering other marginalized groups experience, the fact that hip hop focuses on how blacks negotiate these challenges does not necessarily alienate other similarly disadvantaged groups. Although the Asian students would prefer a greater presence in mainstream hip hop that speaks directly to their experiences , hip hop is still appealing to them. They can still latch onto the disenfranchised black experience and draw parallels to their own realities, much more so I suspect than they can from other genres of music that speak more to the privileged white experience.

Although the Asian students often have to live vicariously in the black and white world of hip hop, they are still drawn to this discourse not only because of the tangible parallels they can cling to, but also the opportunities to fill the void. A number of the Asian students acknowledged that the hip hop landscape is changing with new Asian voices, including their own contributions through their dance and their rap.

> What I do know is that there is a growing hip hop scene in many Asian countries such as South Korea and Japan. (S-dawg – *Mosaic Dance Team*)

> Asians have started to come together to perform hip hop and explain their struggle with race and also coming together as a community. Being an Asian, I know that hip hop is a big aspect of many lives of the Asian community. (TJ – *Mosaic Dance Team*)

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Being an Asian hip hop artist myself, I believe that the world is beginning to accept the Asian community in the hip hop world for there are many Asian rap artists on YouTube that are making money and have a legit following. Asian rappers like D-Pryde, J. Reyez and Traphik all have found tremendous success—not so much in the commercial world but do have many fans on YouTube. (Kalvonix – *Access Denied*)

These students recognize the global nature of hip hop that Terkourafi (2010) pointed out. Although still on the fringes of mainstream hip hop, the Asian presence is growing, particularly in Asian countries and on the Internet with the accessibility of YouTube, as pointed out by S-dawg, TJ and Kalvonix. And although D-Pryde, J. Reyez and Traphik are not household names and are unable to rival the mainstays in contemporary mainstream hip hop in commercial appeal and street credibility, this reality was not a source of despair for the students. Rather it presents an exciting opportunity for them to help re-shape the hip hop landscape.

6.4. *Gimme the Low Down*: Chapter Summary

This chapter presented, analyzed and interpreted the data pertaining to the research participants' understanding of race, identity and hip hop. In particular the data focused on the students' understanding of racial categories through a hip hop lens, which helped to ground their understanding about how they saw racial identities operating in hip hop discourse, their personal lives as well as in school at *Mosaic High*. Although at times some of the students ascribed to racial classification schemes, some also challenged them at the same time. Framed within a hip hop discourse, some students moved beyond their initial understanding of racial identities as essentialized. They did this by grappling and unpacking what it means to them to be white, black and Asian. For some students, these racial identities are defined by their complexity, fluidity, subtleties, contradictions, misconceptions, reconfigurations and redefinitions, and/or potentials for reformation.

The next chapter is part two of the data analysis and interpretation. The focus will be on how the students enacted alternate identities in their hip hop *figured worlds* of *Access Denied*, the *Mosaic High Dance Team* and *Speak*.

7.   *Check it Out!*:
Enacting Alternate Identities

The "new skool" version of "peep this" is "check it out." Essentially, "check it out" asks one to examine, investigate or analyze something further.

This second data analysis and interpretation chapter focuses on the students' understanding of identity, social agency and hip hop. Whereas the previous chapter looked at how the students reproduced and challenged racial identities, this chapter examines how the students enact alternate identities in their *figured worlds* of hip hop rap [*Access Denied*], hip hop dance [the *Mosaic Dance Team*] and hip hop Poetry Slam [*Speak*].

7.1. *My Turf*:
Students' Hip Hop
Figured Worlds

"My turf" is an urban expression declaring ownership of one's space, place, property or world. "My turf" is a familiar and friendly environment, much like "home field advantage," where one feels most empowered.

Each of the three hip hop influenced figured worlds at *Mosaic High* serve a variety of purposes for a number of students. This chapter begins by looking at *Access Denied* and focusing on how one of the students fashioned an able identity. Next, I examine the *Mosaic Dance Team*, centring on how one of the male dancers experimented with his gendered identity. Finally, I conclude with *Speak*, analyzing how a number of participants satirized their racial identity.

7.1.1. Access Denied

Mr. Irshad, one of *Mosaic High*'s Language Arts teachers, found that many of his students had a passion for hip hop. He conceived and developed an extracurricular program called *Access Denied* to encourage youth to write, record and perform raps about personal and socially conscious issues important to them. In the excerpt below, Mr. Irshad described the philosophy behind *Access Denied*.

> *Access Denied*--at first when you hear that you hear it's us pushing people away. But it's not that. We're not pushing people away, we're pushing evil away. We represent a group that says that we don't allow access to any hate, any sexism, any prejudice, or any racism. Any hate period. And that's what we're denying access--not to people. In fact, we need the people to join us in what we call this revolution of change through music. Our mission statement is that "We're trying to cause change, but one song at a time." Although I am the manager and I have my own duties, I try to ensure that *Access Denied* is run as much as possible by the kids because it's one thing for me to try to spark change, but I would be doing a disservice to all the kids if I was the one trying to start it. It's for the kids that have no other means of expressing their personal responses--their emotions--they have no outlet. Writing an essay is not an outlet for them. Rather, the writing is in rhyme. So it's usually for the at-risk youth. (Mr. Irshad – *Access Denied*)

Access Denied is part of the unofficial curriculum at *Mosaic High*, taking place on school property but running outside the timetable. During my observations of *Access Denied*'s lunch hour meetings, I witnessed a collaborative and reflective space where students primarily led a discussion-based gathering of peers who were passionate about their art form and enthusiastic about sharing their positive message of social change with the *Mosaic High* community and beyond. With their teacher who provided guidance and support, the *Access Denied* family often honed in on a social issue theme, brainstormed how to approach it and individually as well as collectively contributed to writing the lyrics and arranging the beats and music (see Appendices C-D). This rap group and program, heavily influenced by hip hop discourse, offers students who "have no other means of expressing their personal responses--their emotions," a safe and nurturing space to address and challenge their marginalization.

Kalvonix experiences a number of forms of marginalization, one being trying to be taken seriously as a Filipino rapper. But for Kalvonix, a student with Cerebral Palsy

who gets around in his wheelchair and on crutches, his disability identity has marginalized him even more, particularly throughout his schooling, including at *Mosaic High*.

> I remember in elementary school I was out on the playground and a bunch of younger kids who were taller than me, because I was small at the time--they kicked me onto the gravel and they said, "Look at this fucking cripple guy and he has four legs," and then they took my crutches away from me and started pretending they were guns and started shooting me with them. That was hard on me because I thought that was the harshest thing you could ever do to someone. It was happening to me and I remember going home crying to my mom, "Why did God make me this way? Why do I have to be the one to go through this?" And then my mom would be like, "You have to consider yourself lucky because there are other people who are mentally handicapped and not physically handicapped like me." I'm okay in the brain. And then I remember me saying. "Yea but because they're mental they don't know they're disabled. I know I am, so then it's harder for me." And there were also times when even in the mall, there's not one person that looks up and down just wondering how I ended up on crutches or there's little kids looking at me for like five minutes. I know that they're little kids and they're curious but sometimes it just really bugs me and it makes me feel like I'm just like some alien in the mall because everybody thinks I'm just different. A harder thing [at *Mosaic High*] is basically getting around cuz you don't have just one classroom. You always have to be moving around and that can be very tiring for me so what's hard is I always have to talk to teachers and explain to them what I can and what I cannot do so then they know ahead of time whether whatever they are planning is appropriate for me and if I can do it. So that's been a struggle but I'm managing that and also another hard thing is lunchtime because when it's lunchtime, everybody is excited so they're running out of their classroom and I usually get trampled. I remember there was one time where I was walking in the hallway and because I was not as fast as other people one girl pushed me out of the way and then I'm like, "Whoa what's your problem?" and she's like, "Fuck you! Why are you so slow?" And that's when I was like, "Okay that's not fair at all." But I kinda understood where she was coming from. She didn't have to be so harsh about it and yes I am slower and you know some people should be more patient. What's hard for me in high school--because I am getting older obviously. It's that time you need to get a girlfriend. That pressure is on you cuz everybody's into girls and getting their own girlfriends and your close friends are forgetting about you because they have a girlfriend. So I always felt when a girl looks at me, I'm always afraid the girl has so much questions for me like, "Oh I don't wanna date this guy cuz people are gonna see me and be like why is she with a handicapped person? Why am I with that?" I always worry about that kinda thing and I know not all girls are like that. I've had a rough time trying to you know see how girls think if they're actually like that because I always worry about that. The questions that I

always ask myself when I see a girl is if she's thinking, "Oh this guy. No this guy is handicapped. I don't want this because if he likes me and I wanna break up with him then it's gonna be too harsh. I don't wanna do this." I don't want to be dating a person because that person feels sorry for me and I want that person to actually like me. I've talked about this with my mom. I remember in Grade 9 I think it was, where I cried saying, "Mom, I'm never gonna get a girlfriend or I'm never gonna get a true friend who actually likes me for who I am because of my disability. They're gonna be my friend or my girlfriend because they feel sorry for me." (Kalvonix – *Access Denied*)

Being disabled for Kalvonix meant being subjected to the psychological as well as physical violence associated with being different a school. Not only was the violence inflicted on him physically – "kicked," "trampled" and "pushed" – and verbally – "Look at this fucking cripple" and "Fuck you! Why are you so slow?" – but it was done with great brutality – "they took my crutches away from me and started pretending they were guns and started shooting me with them." While many of his *Mosaic High* peers took for granted all the *normal* activities and the rituals associated with being an adolescent, such as driving a car, Kalvonix must always consider how he can factor himself into a school culture that essentially has little to no place for him. The privileges that McIntosh (1989) spoke about are often unearned and merely acquired through the sheer luck of the birth lottery, something that Kalvonix clearly understood as being unjust: "Why did God make me this way? Why do I have to be the one to go through this?" Although Kalvonix suffered a double marginalization, his Asian identity was clearly secondary to his crutches.

Because Kalvonix's Cerebral Palsy eclipses all other facets of his identity, his attraction to the world of hip hop, and in particular, his serendipitous discovery of the *figured world* of *Access Denied*, allows him to be defined beyond just his disability. The excerpt below describes how much the *figured world* of *Access Denied* has helped in Kalvonix's re-branding of his own identity, on his own terms.

Access Denied is a rap group who makes songs for students and teachers and do school related topics like what other people in schools might be experiencing. I just thought it would be so cool to involve what I love doing into something that I don't really like, which is school. But rapping and *Access Denied*--it's easier to say I really like school so now I'm just glad I'm having fun with *Access Denied* and for me I believe it gave me more. It showed me another side of rap that I can do where I can actually write about anything. I get a chance to

show people me. When people wanna talk about my disability, I talk to them about it. But with *Access Denied* I get to show them basically my artistic way of explaining my disability. So it's like magic. It's like insane! Something I thought would never happen. And it's kinda weird but it's cool and I think people seeing me in *Access Denied* has also helped them understand how I am. I'm not just--cuz I think the first thing they think when they see me is just, "Oh this guy is probably shy. I don't really wanna talk to him because he's gonna be all mad if I ask him a question about his disability." But my music in *Access Denied* shows them that I'm open with it so if they wanna talk to me or if someone wants to become my friend I'm totally down with that. (Kalvonix – *Access Denied*)

Normally, Kalvonix has little to no control as to how his identity is constructed within *Mosaic High*, a practice Ghosh (1996) argued is an unfortunate but common reality for many young people in schools. Drawing on Ibrahim (1999), one could also suggest that Kalvonix's disability traps him in a *social imaginary*. However, through his lyrics and music, he not only is able to inform his peers about who he is, his raps become his "artistic way of explaining [his] disability." Dimitriadis (2001) argued that the narratives found in popular culture texts and performances, such as hip hop, impact youth's conception of self, which seems to apply to the way Kalvonix uses his raps to tell stories about his life to himself and to his peers so that they both better understand who he is (see Appendix C). These narratives in his raps, in addition to clearing up misconceptions about his disability, also could act to create space for dialogue about his disability with his peers, something he is certainly "down with." Essentially, *Access Denied* affords Kalvonix the agency to, as he phrased it, "show people me."

In addition to illuminating his identity for others, the raps Kalvonix creates in *Access Denied* also serve to help him grapple with how his disability marginalizes him. The excerpt below explains how Kalvonix is influenced and guided by the way hip hop artists channel their frustration and anger into something less destructive and more productive.

The biggest influence I'd have to say in hip hop is Eminem for me. Eminem always raps about his struggles and what he had to do to get to where he is now and that's the rap I wanna make. Also, when Eminem makes angry music or when he's angry at someone and he disses someone in a song like for example, he was mad at his wife so he made a song about him and his daughter murdering his wife and even though that's like a really dark song, I was like, "Damn that's crazy!" I'm not gonna lie. I've made songs like that when I was angry

at someone. I've made like a harsh disc track about them and I'm not about beef or anything. It's just that I feel that it's a good--better than going out and beating up the person that you're mad at so I think I put all my anger into a song and through that, it makes me feel better. I started making music and writing my feelings out because I was frustrated at all my disability. (Kalvonix – *Access Denied*)

Instead of physically confronting his oppressors with violence, Kalvonix, emulating one of his favourite hip hop artists, Eminem, channels his frustration, anger and "beef" at the injustices he must endure at the hands of his peers by producing "harsh disc track[s]" rather than "beating up the person." Through his collection of raps, such as the *Access Denied* inspired track, "But I Did," Kalvonix is also able to chronicle and illuminate for others just how his oppressors ridicule and marginalize him, both in and outside of school.

Going down the hallway, people stare and laugh. / They think that I'm a no one just because I'm handicapped… / Kids call me cripple cuz I walk with 2 canes / They bully me, they hatin' me, they drive me insane… / All the bullies poked fun, and thought that I was dumb… / Age 12 knowingly, I could write poetry, everybody at my school still really doubted me… / People always said I'd never make it on the mic. (Kalvonix – *Access Denied*)

These lyrics give voice to how he is silenced at school by the peers who "stare," "laugh," and "bully" him "down the hallway." According to Holland et al. (1998) a *figured world* offers individuals an experiential and experimental space to reflect on, grapple with and negotiate identity, which is what Kalvonix does when he composes lyrics and beats for his raps about dealing with his disability. In doing so, Kalvonix perhaps comes to a better understanding of how his disability is authoritatively constructed by the dominant discourse of *Mosaic High* where being "cripple[d]"/ "walk[ing] with 2 canes" is criterion for marginalization. Because his *figured world* of hip hop offers him a safe, virtual-like environment for addressing, problem-solving and even resolving difficult and sensitive issues related to his marginalization, Kalvonix might acquire the necessary agency to move to the next step, which is to more directly confront, challenge and contradict the authoritative construction of his identity outside the *figured world*.

Holland et al. (1998) argued that for social change to truly occur, the altered reality in the *figured world* must also materialize on some level in the real world.

Kalvonix's movement towards an *altered* and *reformed* subjectivity is perhaps evidenced in how he was socially repositioned at *Mosaic High* after his involvement with *Access Denied*. Kalvonix describes this kind of transformation below.

> I remember telling my mom, "Mom I have a school rap group now and it's gonna be crazy and I'm like the leader!" and she got all excited. And through *Access Denied* I've been on the front page of the newspaper, I've been on Shaw TV, I've been doing interviews and I've been doing interviews with magazines. I can't believe it's actually happening and it's such a perfect way to end high school. And now that I'm in *Access Denied* all the staff and the whole office loves me. I'm like this celebrity and then they like put me up on a pedestal. I'm honoured to officially be the rapper of the school. I get people constantly coming up to me saying, "Oh my god I saw you on TV the other day. I'm so proud of you." I've been getting a lot more hugs, which is good. I love hugs and people have been coming up to me saying, "You're that *Access Denied* guy!"

Rather than being branded as merely the "cripple guy," Kalvonix's identity is recognized as being multifaceted by the student body. Once an easy target for bullying, he is now a "leader" "put on a pedestal" and a "celebrity" featured on TV shows and in newspaper and magazine articles. Kalvonix's raps and performances were so inspiring that he was often asked to perform in classrooms, at school assemblies and even for the school board. However, the greatest honour came from an invitation to perform on the 2010 Winter Olympics cultural stage, a moment he described below as both surreal and life altering:

> When I first found out I was gonna perform at the Olympics, I was like, "Oh my god I can't believe it." I started out recording on a tape player in my room to now being asked to perform in the Olympics! How does it happen? But it did! At first they asked if I wanted to perform alone or if I wanted people to be with me and of course, it's such a big show I can't do this alone. Since I was involved with *Access Denied* at the time I asked Mr. Irshad, "Can we perform one of our songs and I can perform one of my songs outside of *Access Denied*?" He said, "Yea sure, let's do it!" It was like a magical moment out there. There was like a huge crowd and everybody's screaming my name and especially when they started chanting *Access Denied*! This was like a dream come true and I can't believe I did that. (Kalvonix – *Access Denied*)

As one of the hundreds of spectators in the crowded audience, I witnessed first-hand the transformation of a young man who went from being ridiculed and bullied for his

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disability throughout most of his schooling years, to being cheered on and applauded for his rap performance. Performing *Access Denied*'s signature piece, "Magnus Opus," Kalvonix rapped,

> The girls all like me cuz I'm nice and short / The number of legs I got the same as a horse / Slow and steady wins the race like tortoise and the hare / Meet me at the finish line cuz I'm already there. (Kalvonix – *Access Denied*)

7.1.2.   The Mosaic Dance Team

Abdullah (2006) noted that hip hop, in addition to its rap component, also consists of the equally important dance element. The *Mosaic Dance Team* is also part of the school's informal curriculum, held after school hours and predominantly run by students. Heavily influenced by the genre of hip hop dance, students assemble regularly throughout the school year to choreograph, rehearse, perform and compete. The two teacher sponsors, Ms. Jackson, a Language Arts, Drama and Aboriginal Support teacher, as well as Ms. Sahota, a Math, Science and Learning Support teacher, oversee the supervision of the dance team from a distance. Below are excerpts regarding their thoughts on the *figured world* of the *Mosaic Dance Team* and its appeal to students.

> The energy and the freedom--it's a place for kids to hang out that might not be able to go home after school or have something to do after school where they are getting some exercise too. It's a culture of hip-hop. It is a way for kids to break free from their parents. Parents don't do hip-hop. It's a way for them to have something of their own. We don't tell them what to do. We don't tell them what to dance. (Ms. Jackman – *Mosaic Dance Team*)

> I think that the students are creative and they really like to express their creativity through dance. I get a lot of those and students that aren't necessarily academic. I do get a lot of those. But I think just the non-structured and--they can do things the way they want that probably attracts them. I think maybe the freedom to express themselves that's not always available in classes. Most of the classes in school are very academic and very structured. They do not get the flexibility in school that they get through dance. (Ms. Sahota – *Mosaic Dance Team*)

The *figured world* of the *Mosaic Dance Team* offers students more than just a communal space "for kids to hang out." What is common between Ms. Jackman and Ms. Sahota's assessment of the *Mosaic Dance Team* is its liberation from *authoritative discourses*.

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When Ms. Jackson stated, "We don't tell them what to do. We don't tell them what to dance," she was echoing its core philosophy of a student-led and student-centred approach to dance. Also similar to how *Access Denied* attracts marginalized students such as Kalvonix, the *Mosaic Dance Team* draws "students that aren't necessarily academic," whose talents do not necessarily translate well in the traditional structured classroom setting.

Cedric, a Filipino male student only in Grade 9, is the leader of the *Mosaic Dance Team*, which consists of junior and senior dancers, Grades 8 to 12. During my observations, I saw that not only is he a dancer, Cedric is also primarily responsible for organizing the team's rehearsal and performance/competition schedule, as well as choreographing many of its routines and mentoring new dancers. His passion for all kinds of dance can be traced back to his early childhood, which explains why he is so heavily involved in both the backstage and performance aspects of the team's operation. However, Cedric's involvement with dance has often made him an easy target for ridicule and bullying among his peers at *Mosaic High*. Like Kalvonix, Cedric is teased about his physicality. Whereas Kalvonix was targeted for his disability, Cedric told me he was taunted for his weight. Although being made fun of for being an overweight dancer is hurtful, Cedric explained it pales in comparison to having his masculinity and heterosexuality scrutinized, which he described here.

> Boys can be made fun of if they do ballet or the girl type of dancing. People can be really cruel to guys that dance ballet or stuff. With ballet you do a lot of moves that you have to stretch a lot and then you do the splits. I was kinda hesitant about certain dancing. I didn't have that much confidence in myself. (Cedric – *Mosaic Dance Team*)

Although Cedric is a gifted dancer in a variety of dance styles, his masculinity and sexuality are called into question when he participates in ballet, which the dominant culture of *Mosaic High* considers a "girl type of dancing" because of its "stretch[es]" and "splits," moves that are perceived to be "feminine." This can lead to verbal and even physical harassment, which Cedric can personally attest to.

However, since the *figured world* of the *Mosaic Dance Team* focuses almost exclusively on the hip hop genre of dance, which Cedric explained "is usually for boys and girls, so it's not really a problem," he does not have to abandon his love for dance

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nor risk being further marginalized in the school. In the excerpts below, Cedric and fellow *Mosaic Dance Team* member, S-dawg, explained why boys dancing hip hop, as opposed to other genres of dance, is "not really a problem."

> Because unlike ballet and Jazz, it's [hip hop dancing] really hard hitting and when you play sports you have to be hard. You have to be fast. You have to be quick and like be really hard. Because in sports you have to hit the volleyball or hit the baseball. You can incorporate those moves as well--the Karate and Tae-Kwon-Do moves. You can incorporate Karate and Tae-Kwon-Do as hip hop moves. (Cedric – *Mosaic Dance Team*)

> Most people accept Popping [a hip hop move] as a style of dance that's okay to dance for guys because it's more like the general dance you're used to seeing on TV. It's more robotic movements. More hits which are like quick tensing and contracting the muscles that gives out the aggressive feel to it so I think that's the reason I didn't have a problem with it because I was more of a Popper. Hip hop dance is okay but styles that are like really old or like Salsa or like Tango and ballet-- that stuff is like over-dated and like not that cool. Ballet music is dainty I guess and like hip hop music is more like you know, hardcore. (S-Dawg – *Mosaic Dance Team*)

Dimitriadis (2001) and Majors (1999) argued that the male hip hop identity is defined by a hyperbolized masculinity and examples of this can be found in music lyrics and videos, as well as in dance moves. Hip hop dance is more "sport" than "art," for it is "hard hitting and "fast," much like volleyball and baseball. Cedric also uses a martial arts analogy to contrast hip hop dance from ballet, describing it more like "Karate and Tae-Kwon-Do." Unlike the stretches, splits and pirouettes associated with the more "dainty," "out-dated" and "old" ballet style of dance, hip hop dance is "robotic," "aggressive," "hardcore" and "cool." Ultimately hip hop dance is perceived as more "masculine." As Hill (2009) indicated, hip hop does a good job of perpetuating the myth of a blanketed masculinity and heterosexuality in the discourse. I observed this exaggerated masculinity at the *Mosaic Dance Team*'s rehearsals and dance competition, which manifested itself in the aggressive, street-fight-like way the boys punctuated their moves to the heavy beat and bass of hip hop music. When boys dance in the hip hop style, they are not deviating too much from what Butler (1997) explained as the gender script they have been assigned to perform. Thus, the *figured world* of the *Mosaic Dance Team* offers male students a safer and more nurturing space to dance that they are unable to locate in other parts of the school. Here they can improvise, experiment, express and communicate with their

bodies without much scrutiny and harassment. The athletic and combative driven moves of hip hop dance in many ways shield boys from the taunts, ridicules and bullying they would normally encounter participating in other forms of dance.

Even so, boys still need to self-police that fine line between dance moves within hip hop dance that reaffirm their masculinity and dance moves that brand their femininity. Cedric explained this internal struggle in the excerpt below.

> There's also this type of dance called Waacking and it's also really girly. It's in a type of hip hop and when sometimes I have to do it I feel embarrassed cuz I feel scared that people are gonna judge me from how I dance girly. "Why does he dance like that?" Well Waacking started off from Locking and Popping and it just incorporated into a girl type of dance. It just started incorporating into men's move right now and I really like Waacking but then I really hate it when people judge me for trying to make that choreography. But every time I make that choreography I feel great. At the same time I don't know what people are gonna think. "Oh why are you dancing so gay or stop being so gay when you dance," or stuff like that. I already experienced that like with friends saying that. A lot of people judge with my choreography as well and I'm just trying not to let it get to me. I wish that everyone just stop criticizing dance or say it's girly. I just really wish that everyone can just realize that it's just a sport. I just wish that more people are supportive. (Cedric – *Mosaic Dance Team*)

Similar to OJ and Dee's earlier comments in the previous chapter that if male students were critical of the way women are sexually demeaned in hip hop lyrics and videos they would risk being labelled a homosexual by the *Mosaic High* community, one's sexuality can also be put into question if one's dance moves are deemed too feminine, even if the moves themselves originate from the supposedly "masculine" discourse of hip hop. Even though Cedric enjoys "Waacking," a hip hop style still predominantly associated with female dancers, when he performs this move, even the *figured world* of the *Mosaic Dance Team* is unable to shield him completely from being called "girly" and "gay."

Regardless, the confidence he has gained and the better sense of his own identity that he has developed by participating in the *figured world* of *Mosaic Dance Team* has given him the strength to be able to challenge the *authoritative discourse* that define gender and sexuality. Cedric understands the backlash he will inevitably receive from some of his peers, and even from his so-called "friends," for Waacking. He also understands the possible consequences of having his identity branded homosexual and

the subsequent marginalization that is attached to such a label. Nevertheless, he still incorporates a bit of Waacking into his choreography and performances. Within the protective shield of the hip hop dance style, Cedric can slowly begin to push and blur some of the traditionally rigid boundaries of dance, gender and sexuality lines because of the positive reception he has already garnered from some peers, particularly from other boys. The excerpt below shows that for Cedric, his *figured world* of the *Mosaic Dance Team* has perhaps allowed him to recognize the potential of his own agency to affect positive change among his peers' perception of dance and his identity as a dancer. He is even optimistic enough to believe in his potential to inspire other male peers to not only appreciate but even perhaps participate in dance.

> Every time I hear someone say thank you for influencing me to dance, I feel really great cuz it just gets me away from all the things that other mean people say and it just lifts me up because choreographing is as if I'm helping someone else. It's as if I'm changing someone else's life. You can make fun of me all you want but one day everything will just change right? I would love to be a role model for all the boys. (Cedric – *Mosaic Dance Team*)

7.1.3. *Speak*

Hip hop is rooted in the *griots* African storytelling tradition in which the power of the spoken word can affect great change. Poetry Slams are spaces where these changes can be enacted, particularly for marginalized voices (Gehring, 2005). *Speak* is *Mosaic High*'s own annual Poetry Slam event where students congregate to share their poetry/ rap/ music/ dance, as well as their identities with each other and with the audience (see Appendix E-F). Ms. Mayo, one of *Mosaic High*'s Physical Education teachers, and Ms. Whedon, one of the school's Language Arts teachers, are the co-sponsors of *Speak*. The excerpts below are their reflections on the *figured world* of *Speak*.

> It's interactive. It's the opportunity for the poetry to stand up on stage but to also invite the audience to freely give back, by give-and-take throughout the performance so your audience is not passive. Your audience is interactive and I also believe that there is an undercurrent of music there in the tradition--the ability for the audience to play back to the poet and allow that to affect the beat, to affect the rhythm and to affect the message. The poet changes every time they perform. (Ms. Mayo – *Speak*)

I think the students find their voice through this kind of poetry and sometimes through music. I think that it allows them to feel good about who they are and it allows them to see that there's something they're good at--something that really helps them to get up in the morning and to want to come to school and to want to express themselves. I think for a lot of our students, they're struggling to figure out who they are. (Ms. Whedon – *Speak*)

Similar to the other *figured worlds* of *Access Denied* and the *Mosaic Dance Team*, *Speak* is also a venue for students to "find their voice" as they struggle "to figure out who they are."

Babs, a male Filipino student originally conceived of the idea of creating a space where students of *Mosaic High* could share their ideas with peers in a receptive and nurturing environment and as Ms. Mayo pointed out, also with an "audience [that] is interactive." Babs, who was heavily influenced by hip hop, and more particular, the Slam Poetry aspect of it, described how *Speak* came about in the excerpt below.

Throughout my high school I would listen to hip hop a lot and I found that the things that I would write has this particular hip hop influence that didn't translate too well on a piece of paper but the same time I couldn't rap to save my life. I kinda just gave up on writing and trying to rap impersonate other people. It really wasn't a major thing in my life until maybe the 10th Grade or the 11th Grade when a spoken word artist came to my high school and gave a performance as part of some educational presentation. After that I was hooked and she performed this poem with such emotion and passion that you know, I think everyone in the theatre, no matter how rowdy, they kinda just shut up and listened for three minutes. The Slam Poetry aspect of it is just someone talking. Slam Poetry is taking the words off of a piece of paper and making them and telling them into sounds, and into emotions and taking the words off of a piece of paper and making the audience hear what you have to say instead of just reading it. The performer is able to personify his piece in a way through their body-- the way their body moves--the way the words are said--the way the audience reacts to each line. It really is just how the poet embodies the essence of the poem. He becomes the performer--becomes the poem. The idea of *Speak* came from the desire of students to have a talent show, which wasn't just a show but also more of a sharing with the rest of their peers. The stage wasn't just some platform to just show off and then you know you're done. The *Speak* stage was more of a group showing things--like here is my talent. This is what I share with you guys and I hope you appreciate it. That's the mentality. How it came about was a bunch of friends of mine came up with the idea that we should have a talent show which is a lot better than the ones we had at the school because we don't even get to talk to the

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audience--to our friends. We just do our piece and that's it. They only know us for our performance and not for us as people. All the acts were all students. It ranged from vocalists, to musicians, to poets, to actors, to improv artists. The message we wanted to get across is that everyone has a creative voice and that needs to be spoken and it doesn't necessarily mean that it has to be through speech. You can speak your creative voice in a variety of different ways. You have dancers speaking through movements and you have musicians speaking through notes and melodies and it's really what we needed at the school. (Babs – *Speak*)

In his description of Slam Poetry, there were repeated references to the importance of the performer's identity being interwoven with the performance piece: "The performer is able to personify his piece," "the poet embodies the essence of the poem," and "He becomes the performer--becomes the poem." In essence, *Speak* is a *figured world* in which students possess agency to construct the kind of identity they desire to present to others, rather than the other way around. Supporting what Ms. Mayo and Ms. Whedon articulated earlier, Bab's explanation of the Poetry Slam event's philosophy "that everyone has a creative voice and that needs to be spoken," "in a variety of different ways," whether it be in spoken word form, "through movement" or "through notes and melodies," is like an amalgamation of the three *figured worlds* of *Speak*, *Access Denied* and the *Mosaic Dance Team*. From my observations of *Speak* as both an audience member and performer, it became quite apparent to me that this Poetry Slam event attracts a predominantly marginalized group of *Mosaic High* students, both as performers and audience members, who are seeking to be heard and eager to listen.

What is interesting to note is that the majority of the organizers, performers and audience members participating in and attending *Speak* were of Asian descent. The Asian students of *Mosaic High* is one particular marginalized group that sees itself as not adequately represented in mainstream hip hop, nor appropriately represented in the school. Many of the Asian students in this research believed that their identities are inaccurately, superficially and even unjustly essentialized by the dominant discourse at *Mosaic High*, which often results in ridicule, alienation, racism and other forms of marginalization. Alan, a newly arrived immigrant from China, can personally attest to this: "For me it is very easy to receive racist remarks because first of all I am Chinese and second of all, I'm ESL." Having only lived in Canada during his secondary school

years, Alan's Chinese accent is much more pronounced than his other Asian peers, which as he pointed out made him easier target for racial discrimination.

The *figured world* of *Speak* offers these Asian students a much needed venue in which they can grapple with the ways their identities are constructed by the dominant culture of *Mosaic High*. In the first year I was invited to participate as a performer for *Speak*, I composed and delivered a rap called, "The Bubble Tea Gangsta," that satirizes the way Asian identity is essentialized in the dominant culture. When I was asked the following year to perform again, I invited students to collaborate with me and with each other on a sequel called, "The Bubble Tea Family" (see Appendix E). In our collaboration, we discussed how they perceived Asian identity being constructed at *Mosaic High* and how it impacts their own construction of self. Using the venue of *Speak*, the students composed original satirical spoken word pieces as a way to illuminate the racism they endure, poke fun at the stereotypes, and most importantly, reclaim agency over their construction of their own identity.

Manila Ice, a male student born in the Philippines, was one of the members of "The Bubble Tea Family" who satirized the way he believed Filipinos are essentialized. First of all, his name, which references one of the first mainstream white rappers, Vanilla Ice, is also a "shout out" to his home city, a convention common in hip hop. Although Manila Ice normally wears hip hop influenced clothing at school, such as basketball shoes, jeans and hoodies, he costumed himself in an over-sized, buttoned-up dress shirt, jeans shorts and sandals to exaggerate the "FOB" [fresh-off-the-boat] look. In a just as exaggerated Tagalog accent, Manila Ice rapped,

> We got pianos, guitars and Karaoke machines / We have a good time, if
> you know what I mean / Filipino time's not at nine but at ten / From
> Journey to hours of Boyz II Men.
>
> Straight outta high school we get into nursing / Pleasing our parents
> before they start cursing / Back to the Phils where we live off the land / A
> life of poverty far from bland. (Manila Ice – *Speak*)

Here Manila Ice satirized the stereotypes that all Filipinos sing sappy love songs on their Karaoke machines, referencing two ubiquitous acts of the 1980s and 1990s, "Journey" and "Boyz II Men," which garnered enthusiastic applause and laughter from the

audience that got the inside joke. However, the second verse is more serious in tone, alluding to the poverty of his developing homeland, where for many Filipinos citizens who want to immigrate to Canada, pursuing a nursing career is one of a few limited opportunities for professional advancement.

Another member of "The Bubble Tea Family" was Kim Park Chi, a male South Korean student born in Canada who was frustrated at having to always validate his Canadian identity for others. For his part of the performance, Kim Park Chi, unlike Manila Ice, spoke in a fluent "Canadian" accent and dressed in Western clothing. Parodying the 1990s Molson Canadian Beer commercial, "I Am Canadian," in which the speaker certifies his Canadian identity, Kim Park Chi had the South Korean national anthem playing in the background, revealing his reality of being trapped in between two cultural worlds,

> I don't own a laundry mat, / And I don't go to UBC, / At home I call them umma and appa, / And yes, SFU does stand for "So you Failed UBC."

> And no mom I don't want to become a doctor, / Or a nurse or a lawyer, / I hate playing the violin, / And playing ping pong all day. (Kim Park Chi – *Speak*)

Like Manila Ice, Kim Park Chi also satirized the stereotypes connected to his culture, such as owning laundry mats and playing the violin and ping pong. With sarcasm, he debunks the idea that for Asian students, not getting into the "best" university to become a doctor, nurse or lawyer is a travesty to the Asian culture, when he wryly raps, "And yes, SFU does stand for 'So you Failed UBC'." Incidentally, Kim Park Chi is a current SFU student. He ended with a more aggressive tone, particularly with his use of the word "hate," which represents his anger at his peers not believing who he says he says he is, which in a Canadian. Similar to Manila Ice's performance, Kim Park Chi's bit also prompted laughter and cheers from the receptive audience.

When White Rice, a male student of various European backgrounds emerged on stage playing an Erhu, a Chinese violin, the audience also erupted into applause and laughter. In addition to his persona name, the juxtaposition of his whiteness with the yellowness of his musical instrument, as well as the fact that up to this point there were

only Asian performers, became fodder for his comedy. The humour was only exacerbated when in both English and fluent Mandarin, he rapped,

> HOWDY Y'ALL! / Wo hui shuo pu tong hua! [I can speak Chinese] / I know what you're thinking: QUOI?! / Ni chi le wo de hou zi means you ate my monkey.
>
> Would you deny me now, / if you know I liked Jay Chou?... / Because I want nobody, nobody, nobody but you!

White Rice's self-deprecating opening greeting, "HOWDY Y'ALL" pokes fun at the "white trailer park trash" motif assigned to the lowest class of white people. But this is quickly contrasted with his fluent Mandarin, which debunks the notion that all whites are monolingual and Eurocentric. In the second verse, White Rice turns the dominant culture discourse upside-down, pleading with the Asians to accept him into *their* Asian world. He proves his inside cultural worthiness by referencing Jay Chou, a popular Taiwanese recording artist and actor, someone who would be completely foreign to most white students at *Mosaic High.* When he sings, "Because I want nobody, nobody, nobody but you!," a homage to the Korean girl Pop group, "The Wonder Girls," Kim Park Chi, Manila Ice, me as the Bubble Tea Gangsta and all the other remaining four Asian performers embrace White Rice into our "Bubble Tea Family."

The *figured world* of *Speak* offers marginalized students at *Mosaic High* the opportunity to not only grapple with their identity, it provides them with a safe, nurturing and supportive stage to share and showcase who they are. Abdullah (2006) and McLaren (1997) reminded critics that the discourse of hip hop is essentially about dismantling social norms and challenging hegemonic institutions, something that *Speak* embodies. In the *figured world* of *Speak*, young people can discover their agency to be able to confront the *authoritative discourse*, negotiate the nuance, complexity, contradiction and fluidity of their identity, experiment with how they want to fashion themselves, construct a more internally persuasive version of themselves, showcase their identity and even poke fun at themselves along the way. Babs, the originator of this Poetry Slam event, best sums up the power of *Speak*.

> This kind of event is so important because there's so many kids out there that are just too shy to show the real them--the real person within them. It's kinda like they are just performing amongst their

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peers instead of performing for their peers. And we found that even the quietest kids after they performed, they became so much more alive once they felt that rush in a performance. Just let them be who they want to be. Let them share what they want to share of themselves because what they are doing is leaving themselves vulnerable. They're taking that wall down for you to see. And that's something special once you know that front comes down and you see the creativity and the realness and the truth within each person. (Babs – *Speak*)

7.2. *Gimme the Low Down*: Chapter Summary

This final data analysis and interpretation chapter examined the students' understanding of identity and social agency in relation to hip hop. More specifically, I investigated how the students enacted alternate identities in the three hip hop influenced venues at *Mosaic High*. These *figured worlds* provided students, particularly marginalized ones, with a safe, nurturing, supportive and encouraging venue to grapple with their identity. Through hip hop rap, dance and/or Slam Poetry, students could then begin to experiment with who they are, confront *authoritative discourses* that have prescribed identities for them and begin to change and enact the kinds of identities that were once unattainable to them.

In the final chapter, I will offer recommendations for curricular reform in the Secondary Language Arts that are informed by the data collected from the students' understanding of race, identity, social agency and hip hop. As well, I will consider the pedagogical potentials found in their *figured worlds* of hip hop and how they can help to further inform curricular change. I will conclude with comments about future research directions.

8. *Bring it On!*:
Results, Recommendations and Reflections

When a person is engaged in conflict with an adversary, the expression "bring it on" communicates a willingness to engage in the confrontation. However, the expression can also mean an invitation to listen to someone's thoughts, ideas or suggestions.

The goal of my research was to gain a better understanding about how students at *Mosaic High* engage with hip hop discourse found in the informal curriculum of their school. As prefaced in the introduction chapter, I wondered how their understanding of and experiences/engagement with hip hop shape their conceptions of complex issues around race, identity and social agency. My hope was that a better understanding of the students' relationship with hip hop could help to inform improvements to the Secondary Language Arts curriculum as well as to encourage further research in the area.

My research was theoretically grounded in a sociocultural and pedagogical framework focusing on those who write about **popular culture** and **pedagogy** (Ibrahim, 2004; McLaren, 2003; Giroux, 1996; Apple, 1993), **hip hop** (Chang, 2013; Terkourafi, 2010; Abdullah, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 2005; Dimitriadis, 2001; hooks, 1994), **race** (Ghosh & Abdi, 2004; Fleras & Elliott, 2003; Dei, 1996; McIntosh, 1989), **identity** (Yon, 2000; Holland et al., 1998; Butler, 1997) and **social agency** (Holland et al., 1998; Freire, 1993; Bakhtin, 1984, 1981).

My methodology was situated in an interpretive epistemology common in qualitative studies. Employing the case study approach, I focused on the unique setting of *Mosaic High*, where hip hop discourse was particularly prevalent in the school and influential to the student body. I gathered data from both group and individual interviews focusing on hip hop discourse, as well as conducted observations and collected artefacts connected to three hip hop venues at *Mosaic High*: *Access Denied*, the *Mosaic Dance Team* and *Speak*.

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The data collected was presented, analyzed and interpreted in two chapters. The first chapter focused on the students' understanding of racial identities and hip hop. The second data analysis/interpretation chapter centred on how the students enacted alternate identities in their *Mosaic High* hip hop *figured worlds* of dance, rap and slam poetry.

In this final chapter I will first examine some of the key themes that emerged from the data analysis/interpretation chapters and how they help to answer the inquiry questions I put forth at the start of this research. Based on the key findings from the data, I then go on to offer some recommendations about how the Secondary Language Arts curriculum could be further developed so that it is more relevant and inclusive for all students at *Mosaic High*. In addition, I suggest further research directions in the area of hip hop, pedagogy and the Language Arts curriculum. I end the chapter with some reflections on how hip hop continues to influence the lives of some of the student participants who have since graduated from *Mosaic High*.

8.1. *Sup?*: Addressing the Inquiry Questions

"Sup?" is the shorten form of "what's up?" or "what up?" This word is often used as a general greeting in place of the more traditional "hello." When one asks, "sup?," one is also inquiring as to what has already transpired and what one makes of it.

When I initially set out to discover how these young people's hip hop discourse impacts their understanding of race, identity and social agency, I hypothesized that introducing hip hop into our discussions would encourage students to be more willing to engage in conversations with their peers and with me, to find meaning and relevance, and to grapple with complex issues, which in fact was the case. However, what I had not anticipated was the extent to which some of the students were personally invested in the discourse, and how this led to a deeper understanding and nuanced articulation of issues around race, identity and social agency. Hip hop not only helped to scaffold their thinking and learning, it made them more willing and more enthusiastic about engaging in difficult and taboo discussions about complex and sensitive issues that they would normally refrain from discussing in a formal school environment. Some students

indicated that these kinds of discussions were even avoided with their close friends in social settings outside of *Mosaic High*. What I quickly learned was that there was not only a sincere interest from all the students to engage with these issues, there was also, according to some of the students, a pressing need for some who found it extremely challenging to navigate through these difficult and sometimes painful issues by themselves. Essentially, these students wanted to talk about these issues, had a lot to say and were pleased to be provided with a safe place to speak about them, whether it be in a focus group, in a one-on-one interview or through one of the three hip hop venues at *Mosaic High*.

In the case of their understanding of race, the students' initial articulation of how racism was relatively non-existent in their school came as a surprise to me. As a teacher at *Mosaic High* I have witnessed numerous episodes of racism that continue to permeate the school in more subtle forms, although not exclusively so, I was initially troubled by the students' claims that for many of them racism was "no big deal." It was unsettling to me to hear how the students readily bought into the feel-good message of "we are all the same" promoted in many Provincial and District school programs and curricula since their elementary school years. I think that the aim to achieve "tolerance" has resulted in a stifling of many students' critical consciousness about institutional and hegemonic racism within our Canadian "*Mosaic*" social fabric, which might account for the students' initial response that *Mosaic High* was racism-free. My worry was that the "colour blinding" of students' critical lenses throughout their schooling would disable their ability to see the injustices that some of their peers at *Mosaic High* are subjected to on a daily basis because of their skin colour and culture. I was concerned that it would also incapacitate their ability to recognize their own marginalization at the hands of the dominant culture. My trepidation grew as I considered how their initial obliviousness to the way racism exists and operates at *Mosaic High* would only perpetuate the beliefs and practices that permit the continued oppression of the student body, particularly the most vulnerable members of the school community.

However, when our discussion on race was situated within the students' hip hop discourse, the students became more vocal about the inner workings of racism at their school and began rattling off example after example of the racist beliefs and practices they have witnessed and/or experienced first-hand at *Mosaic High*. Once the students

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were able to find parallels between hip hop discourse on race and the discourse of race at their school, they not only offered countless examples of racism at *Mosaic High*, they more importantly began deconstructing the way race operates in the school and classrooms, with their peers and themselves, and the implications of this to their understanding of what race means to them.

In the students' discussion on race, it became clear that what was most important and relevant to their lives was their concern about racial classification as it impacts their racial identities, a concept that is commonly addressed in hip hop lyrics. In particular they were troubled about how and why they and their peers were racially divided by other peers at *Mosaic High* without much say in the matter, and according to relatively arbitrary traits. Having witnessed this myself, I was not surprised by their objections to the many ways in which white, black and Asian racial identities are essentialized at school. Nevertheless, some of the students' understanding of racial identities suggests that they reproduced racial classification schemes while others reproduced as well as challenged them at the same time. For example, in their understanding of racial identities, the students focused on issues regarding racial classification, normalization and marginalization. Some students understood racial identities in the context of whiteness (Caucasian), blackness (Negro) and yellowness (Asian), while some went on to challenge the prescriptions and unpack the nuances within each racial category

When the students focused on the concept of white identity, they viewed this identity in a paradoxical way, as both the oppressor and the oppressed. They situated the white identity in the greater society as one with power, particularly power to subordinate and suppress other racial groupings. But when framed in a hip hop discourse, the white identity is stripped of this power, leaving it susceptible to the same form of racism the students initially accused it of inflicting on other racial groups. Within the context of their school, the students also assessed the white identity in the same way, claiming the negative portrayal of the white identity in hip hop has perhaps contributed to the condoning of "white bashing" that they claim is common practice at *Mosaic High*.

Although I had anticipated that the white students would probably object to this negative portrayal of their identity in both hip hop and at *Mosaic High*, only one of them

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was vocally critical of this construction of whiteness. I suspect the others might have been reluctant to express their disapproval because of their fear of being perceived and/or labelled a racist by their non-white peers in the group interview. However, during the one-on-one interview, the vocal white student perhaps felt safer expressing his disagreement with "white bashing" because he was protected from the scrutiny of his non-white peers. This suggests to me that for some white students in a racially diverse school setting such as *Mosaic High*, they must strategically learn to navigate difficult racial terrains. Strategically positioning themselves within a pluralistic environment shields some white students from being marginalized themselves for their perceived oppressor identity.

The students also reflected on and articulated their conception of the black identity. Their understanding was heavily influenced by the African-American construction of the black identity, particularly as it is manifested through hip hop. They grappled with two recurring definitions of the black identity: (a) the unfortunate, and (b) the undesirable. Some students argued that hip hop's ability to illuminate the social injustices faced by black people historically and currently make the black identity one that they can empathize with easily. However, some of the students argued that the ubiquitous and repeated images/themes of poverty, violence and crime often associated with blacks in hip hop music and videos ultimately acts to reinforce the traditional belief that the black identity is inferior and to a great extent, undesirable. Furthermore, most students were sceptical even when blacks are depicted positively in hip hop, arguing that these depictions only illustrate the limitations and stereotypes associated with what it is like to be black. Some students cited examples of how their peers at *Mosaic High* on one level were fascinated by the kind of black identity celebrated in hip hop, but ultimately many of these peers would never actually want to be black themselves.

The students were particularly critical of how black males and females are portrayed in hip hop, especially the way it reinforces patriarchy. But they understood that for boys at *Mosaic High*, outwardly rejecting the overly masculine construction of the black male identity and the sexual exploitation of the black female identity can result in having their masculinity and heterosexuality questioned, something that would socially ostracize them from their peers. I was troubled by what seemed like within the greater school student population some male students' condoning of misogyny and homophobia

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at *Mosaic High*. I wondered how this impacts the male students' relationships and daily interactions with their female peers. I also worried for the physical, psychological and emotional safety of the very few visible LGBT students as well as the possibly numerous closeted ones who would continue to suppress their identity in light of the rampant homophobia at *Mosaic High*. As Dee indicated, being gay and/or being perceived as gay is "the worst thing to happen in high school." Although some of the male students in the study as well as some of their male peers at *Mosaic High* reluctantly, yet strategically surrendered to certain aspects of the dominant discourse that dictates the normalcy of their gender and sexuality in order to belong and be safe at *Mosaic High*, they do so at the expense of isolating and oppressing some female and LGBT students.

Their discussion on black identity gravitated to the word Nigger, which they all agreed has been made more accessible and even permissible to them by hip hop. Some students denounced any use of the word while another group argued for considering the multidimensional and contextual implications of the word before fully dismissing it. For some students, the "Nigger" or "Nigga" identity propagated by hip hop does not necessarily equate to an oppressed identity that has been traditionally prescribed by white slave masters. Rather, the Nigger identity can be a reclaiming and a re-visioning of identity that represents solidarity, camaraderie and agency. Although I appreciate their willingness to honestly articulate how the word Nigger is bantered about at *Mosaic High* and among their peers, and I accept that they possess some background knowledge about the word's historical context as well as acknowledge their re-appropriation of it within their *figured world*, I was and am nevertheless uneasy at how dismissive and glib some of the students were about its function and significance within their understanding of modern day racial discourse and identity. It may be that hip hop's often causal and/or strategically marketable use of the word Nigger and the promotion of the Nigger identity are responsible for the students' desensitized, and some may argue, disrespectful reaction to it. However, in the unpacking of the word Nigger in our discussion together, I sensed the students began to either share my trepidation or at least consider it as a point for more careful introspection at a later time. However, I suspect this does not necessarily mean these students will refrain from using the word altogether.

The students also offered their thoughts on what it means to be Asian within hip hop and within the halls and classrooms of *Mosaic High*. They articulated that Asian

representation in mainstream hip hop is minimal at best. Although many of the students knew that "Asian" hip hop exists, it is not considered "real" hip hop by most of the *Mosaic High* community, and to some degree I would add that some of the Asian students themselves would agree. The fact that it is a branch of hip hop serving a particular niche and secondary to the central hip hop discourse supports what some of the Asian students argued is their inadequate representation in the music. During the rare occasions the Asian identity is even present in mainstream hip hop, it is often depicted in very limited, stereotypical and generally negative ways, which act to further marginalize them. Nevertheless, the parallels between the black and Asian experience of oppression, marginalization and racism might be reason why some Asian students are drawn to hip hop, even though they are not directly represented. For example, the discourse around the word Nigger in many ways mirrors the Asian students' negotiation of the word Chink. Although they would prefer greater representation in hip hop, some of the Asian students saw this void as an opportunity to directly participate in reshaping the hip hop landscape with their own brand of "yellow" raps and "yellow" dance.

The theme of the marginalized identity is one that is pervasive throughout much of hip hop discourse, which was not lost on these Asian students, for many of them could personally identify with this. Many of them connected with how hip hop is trying to reclaim and redefine the black identity that has been and continues to be suppressed by the dominant white culture, just like how the Asian students were trying to figure out who they are in the face of the *authoritative discourses* of parents, teachers, administrators and peers. Although some students initially projected confidence about who they are, many of them, like their hip hop counterparts, struggled to come to terms with their identity. Seeing their hip hop heroes grappling, experimenting and negotiating with their identity offered many of the students, Asians and non-Asians alike, reassurance that they are not alone in their difficult journey to figure out who they are through the halls and classrooms of *Mosaic High*, and even perhaps effect change in the process.

However, many of the students struggled with coming to terms with how seemingly daunting the task of affecting social change at *Mosaic High*, let alone in the outside world, would be. And although higher profile anti-racism and anti-homophobia initiatives, such as Multicultural Day, Japanese Cultural Exchange Day, Pink Shirt Day (anti-bullying day) and Gay/Straight Alliance Club have been introduced to the *Mosaic*

High community in recent years to encourage inclusivity and celebrate diversity, it is evident from the students' comments that the *authoritative discourse* that dictates how their gender, sexuality and race are normalized/marginalized ultimately trumps any program and resource that have been introduced to them at the school level thus far. Talking about, being inspired and willing to contribute to social change are important and necessary. However, this is not enough for these students; they need a space to enact social change. One of the reasons for the overwhelming success of the *figured worlds* of *Access Denied*, the *Mosaic Dance Team* and *Speak* is that these hip hop influenced venues offer students a safe and nurturing space to exercise, practice, experiment and enact alternate identities. Whether through rap, dance, music or spoken word art form, students can freely question and challenge *authoritative discourses* in these venues knowing that they are protected from many punitive sociocultural consequences, such as being ridiculed by their peers and/or further marginalized by the *Mosaic High* student body. Guised in the protective veil of hip hop's popularity, acceptability, respectability and "coolness," students are able to get away with saying and doing certain things that they would normally be taunted, criticized or even beaten up for otherwise. In many ways, the students' performances in these hip hop venues could be seen as a dress rehearsal of sorts that allow them to take risks and make mistakes without dire consequences. This process of enacting alternate identities might allow them to gain greater belief and confidence in their own agency to affect even greater change within the halls and classrooms of *Mosaic High* as well as the larger society outside the school walls.

For example, Kalvonix employed his raps and performances in *Access Denied* to address and deal with his disability. Having endured a painful history of taunting and bullying throughout his schooling because of his Cerebral Palsy, Kalvonix was left with a prescribed identity that was undesirable and marginalized by his peers. Joining *Access Denied* offered him a venue to begin to come to terms with his disability and a place to vent his anger, frustration and pain over how he has been alienated by the dominant culture inside and outside *Mosaic High*. In the *figured world* of *Access Denied* Kalvonix seemed to possess more agency over his own identity, allowing him to fashion a different version of himself that his peers have never seen before. In doing so, not only was he able to showcase a much more dynamic identity for his peers to learn about, he

was perhaps more importantly able to see himself reflected in the eyes of his peers as more than his physical disability.

In many similar ways, Cedric's involvement with the *Mosaic Dance Team* seemed to afford him the agency to not only address the bullying he experienced being a male dancer, he was able to experiment with his gendered identity. Under the protective umbrella of a "masculine" hip hop dance discourse, Cedric could participate in dance relatively free from having his gender and sexuality scrutinized. However, certain dance moves, even within the relatively "masculine" style of hip hop are generally forbidden for male dancers to perform, unless they want to jeopardize their masculinity and heterosexuality. Nevertheless, the agency Cedric might have acquired in his participating in the figured word of the *Mosaic Dance Team* was probably enough for him to begin blurring the authoritative gender and sexuality lines.

Whereas Cedric experimented with his gendered identity and Kalvonix constructed for himself an able identity, the students of *Speak* negotiated their racial identities at *Mosaic High*'s Poetry Slam event. Tired and frustrated about the way Asian identity is essentialized within the dominant culture of *Mosaic High*, the students wanted voice in saying who they were. Using the stage of *Speak*, the students showcased and performed aspects of their Asian identity unfamiliar to the general student body. They did this by satirizing the way their Asian identity has been marginalized. Through their satirical spoken word pieces, the students not only experimented with their Asian identity, they mocked those who inaccurately profiled them, and even poked fun at themselves in the process. In telling and showing the audience who they were *not*, they announced who they were.

The socially conscious aspects of hip hop tell students like Cedric, Kalvonix and others that even in the face of seemingly insurmountable obstacles, whether they be racism, poverty or drug addiction, one always possesses some form of agency to overcome them. Iconic and charismatic hip hop figures such as Tupac, for example, offer some students tangible evidence of this claim, for he was able to rise from the Projects to the top of the hip hop world. This modeling of social change through hip hop discourse in such a musically engaging, visually stunning, emotionally charged and inspirationally moving way may be the kind of tangible evidence some of these students

required in order to be persuaded that social transformation is a plausible reality rather than a naïve ideal. Although I find it problematic how some hip hop could mislead young people into falsely believing that their ability to enact change is a simple and quick process that will result in monumental societal shifts, its redeeming quality lies in its optimistic reminder to young people of their personal agency and potential to affect change in the world, a message that was certainly not lost on the students.

8.2. *New Skool*: Visions for Curricular Change

Whereas "old skool" references something from the past, "new skool" refers to the most current, and often is used to distinguish the past from the present.

In my introductory chapter, I wrote about how I wanted the data I collected from my research to help me "other" the Secondary Language Arts curriculum in order that it can be more inclusive and relevant to all students, particularly marginalized ones. The reproducing and constant validating of the dominant culture in educational curricula is common practice throughout a variety of school subjects. The Secondary Language Arts curriculum at *Mosaic High* is no exception for it is heavily influenced by Western culture, evidenced by the kinds of prescribed learning outcomes, teaching methodologies and selections of literature favoured and featured in the current British Columbia Ministry of Education's curricular documents.

However, in "othering" a curriculum I am not suggesting that the Western canon be eliminated entirely from Language Arts, for I would argue that banishing the teaching of the dominant cultural content of the curriculum is just as harmful as exclusively focusing on it. In order for students to be able to question, critique, challenge and change the dominant sociocultural order, they need to know who the Shakespeares, Tolstoys and Blakes of the world are, as well as how and why these dead, white, European men came to be revered and seen as the standard by which all literary works and authors are to be judged. Without exposure to this contextualization, students, particularly the ones whose sociocultural worlds outside the walls of *Mosaic High* are void of these kinds of Western cultural influences, will find themselves further marginalized. The challenge for educators then becomes the delicate balance between

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educating marginalized youth about dominant cultural discourse while at the same time making the curricular content relevant and meaningful to those students whose frames of reference are far from the Western cultural norm. "Othering" a curriculum essentially means being willing to change one's approach to pedagogy as the educational needs of students change.

Change to educational curricula in British Columbia is coming soon. The new B.C. Education Plan, although still in the pre-implementation stages, will theoretically be in place in all schools in the province in the fall of 2013 (bcedplan.ca). This 21st-century learning model is premised on the Minister of Education's mission statement that "The world has changed...the way we educate our children should too." What I will be proposing in regards to a hip hop pedagogy within the Secondary Language Arts curriculum aligns with some of the key principles of the new B.C. Ed Plan.

One of the key principles of the new B.C. Ed Plan stresses the importance of what the Ministry terms, "Personalized Learning," which means exploring and honouring students' out-of-school passions and interests. What this means is that teachers will be asked to encourage their students to bring their informal curriculum to their formal learning at the school. Students will be given academic credit for non-traditional kinds of knowledge that were not necessarily valued nor rewarded by the current education system. According to the Ministry's online document, Personalized Learning means "Students will play an active role in designing their own education" (bcedplan.ca).

When I surveyed all the student and teacher participants in this research about their views on hip hop's place in the formal English classroom, they unanimously and enthusiastically supported its inclusion in the Secondary Language Arts curriculum. As was shown throughout this research, many of the students were passionate about hip hop. In addition to hip hop being a popular and well-liked form of music for most students at *Mosaic High*, they also cited a number of logical reasons why including it in their English classes is pedagogically sound. However, some of the students were quick to caution educators about the need to distinguish some mainstream hip hop from its original form, arguing that the former could be a distorted and problematic version of what hip hop was intended to be. Nevertheless, a few of the students proposed using mainstream hip hop in the curriculum to help students exercise their critical

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consciousness by deconstructing its production. They argue that this is something that most of their peers rarely do in their daily listening and viewing of hip hop. Aside from the poetic elements already found in hip hop, which directly addresses one of the curriculum's prescribed learning outcomes, a number of students argued that rappers such as Tupac, Nas and Eminem are essentially modern versions of Wordsworth, Coleridge and Keats. The difference for them is that hip hop's poetic language and subject matters are more accessible and more relevant to them than the elevated use of archaic English used to describe Tintern Abbeys, Ancient Mariners and Nightingales. Two male students, Kalvonix and Alias, speaking from personal experience argued that for young men especially, who have traditionally struggled with literacy in school settings, hip hop could introduce them to the relevance of studying the intricacies of language and poetry, as well as even inspire them to pen their own original works. Here I would add that perhaps hip hop may even get these students interested in Wordsworth, Coleridge and Keats down the road. What I can conclude from my discussions with the students about hip hop and the formal curriculum is that they are eager for a new mode of literacy acquisition that is more relevant and inclusive within their Language Arts curriculum. They want their formal Language Arts curriculum to foster an authentic engagement with literacy, language, and social and personal issues that is beyond just the traditional poetry, prose and play genres they are so accustomed to, but not necessarily engaged with nor personally invested in.

Another key principle in the B.C. Ed Plan states that student learning at school must have "Flexibility and Choice." According to this principle students will be offered a number of options about what they will learn, how they will learn it, and even when and where they will learn it. For example, learning does not necessarily have to always take place in a traditional classroom, in desks, with textbooks about British writers and between the hours of nine and three o'clock.

The hip hop influenced *figured worlds* of *Access Denied*, the *Mosaic Dance Team* and *Speak* are essentially concrete models for the Ministry's principle of "Flexibility and Choice." They emerged organically and thrived partly in reaction to what some students recognized was lacking in the formal Language Arts curriculum of *Mosaic High*. Some of them believed there were no appropriate venues nor forums within the formal curriculum that allowed them to freely enact alternate identities, and engage in

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challenging and changing dominant cultural expectations without punitive consequences from their peers, teachers and/or administrators. All three hip hop venues are counter-dominant cultural spaces outside many of the constraints and limitations of the official school curriculum. Unlike the classroom, the control of the learning materials, teaching methodologies and assessment practices is shifted from the hands of the teachers, administrators and school to the students themselves. Even though each hip hop venue is sponsored by a teacher and sanctioned by the school's extracurricular policy, it was the students who assumed the bulk of the responsibilities, organization and most importantly, leadership and vision. Even operating outside the dictatorship of the school bell is symbolic of how important it is to the students that these hip hop venues maintain their autonomy from the official operation of the school. After all, how can students critique, challenge and change the *authoritative discourse* when they are in partnership with it? Although this research aimed to find ways in which the students' *figured worlds* of hip hop could be integrated into the formal Secondary Language Arts curriculum, ironically, I discovered that it is their independence from the *authoritative discourse* of formal schooling that is central to *Access Denied*, the *Mosaic Dance Team* and *Speak*'s philosophy, appeal and success.

Nevertheless, this does not necessarily mean that these hip hop venues cannot co-exist and collaborate within the formal curriculum. Rather, educators must be especially mindful of the contextual positioning of these venues as well as honour and respect the student ownership of them before entering into any partnership and collaboration. The role of the formal curriculum is to offer more support, resources, prominence and accessibility, rather than become another form of authoritative obstacle for the students to contend with. This means the Language Arts curriculum needs to be reconfigured to accommodate these hip hop venues rather than the other way around. If these conditions can be met and agreed upon by all stakeholders, especially the students, the potential for these hip hop venues to reach and positively impact a greater number of students at *Mosaic High* could be achieved when teachers, administrators and the school work in conjunction with student representatives from all three venues to further develop, expand and strengthen them. *Access Denied*, the *Mosaic Dance Team* and *Speak* could have a meaningful place in the Language Arts curriculum, but most importantly, it *must* preserve its sociocultural grounding on the outskirts of the

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authoritative discourse, something that is fundamentally core to what all three of these hip hop *figured worlds* are all about.

In addition to the principles of "Flexibility and Choice" and "Personalized Learning," the B.C. Ed Plan advocates an inquiry based approach to learning in which students deeply investigate and research issues that are personally important to them. Rather than the delivery of a breadth of knowledge from a teacher-centred perspective currently in place in many classrooms, the new BC Ed Plan emphasizes a depth of understanding in student learning that is student-centred. In fact, the Ministry of Education is planning to eliminate quite a number of Prescribed Learning Outcomes from the current Language Arts curriculum, both at the Elementary and Secondary levels in order to help alleviate the pressure of teachers having to teach to a content and standardized test driven curriculum.

Inquiry based learning begins with the students' basic sense of curiosity about something, which then leads them to ask probing questions. As they grapple with their inquiry individually and collectively, they find creative ways to address their questions. Although my initial justification for employing the focus group interview was that it provided a means to collect data on how youth understand a range of complex issues, I did not foresee how this methodology was also good pedagogy in itself. The focus group participants unanimously expressed their appreciation for being offered a safe space to critically discuss, collaboratively share and collectively envision something they all agree was often missing in their Language Arts classes, as well as other classes at *Mosaic High*. I suspect that a number of factors might explain why meaningful in-depth class discussions that are maintained throughout the duration of a course were rare at *Mosaic High*. These might include curricular demands, class scheduling, student/teacher ratios and perhaps some teachers' unwillingness to, fear of and/or even inability to relinquish "control" of the class. However, if the focus group model I used is to be authentically replicated in the classroom, students must be given time, space, guidance and support so that they can meaningfully engage, discuss and grapple with complex issues about who they are and how they see themselves situated in the school, community and world. As attested to by all the focus group participants, this kind of learning approach is something they want and need. It is also an approach the Ministry of Education supports.

8.3. *And?*: Future Studies

"And?" is uttered by a listener, usually following a pause by the speaker. It means "so what?" or what is the significance of it. It also can be a way of inquiring about "what's next?"

As with all research projects, there needs to be some form of closure, although this does not necessarily mean an end. Rather, this study is the start to a number of possible future research directions and possibilities. Within the scope of this research, I was able to uncover insights on how *Mosaic High's* students' engagement with hip hop helped to inform and shape their understanding of race, identity and social agency. These insights also led me to explore the pedagogical potential of hip hop within a Secondary Language Arts curriculum that better address the needs of these students, particularly ones who have been traditionally marginalized by the *authoritative discourse* of the dominant culture. Answering the research questions I posed at the beginning of my study has not only allowed me to come to a much better understanding of students' engagement with hip hop, but it has also led me to consider exploring other hip hop research avenues.

Although this research focused on secondary school-aged students, mostly from the senior level, there is no doubt that even younger students are listening to and consuming hip hop with possibly not much pedagogical guidance. In my work with pre-service educators planning to teach in the elementary and middle school levels, it has come to my attention that hip hop is also popular with students as young as those in primary school. Like their secondary school counterparts, hip hop music is blasting through their iPods while they sing, dance, posture and dress to often sexually and violently provocative lyrics without what seems on the surface at least, to be a deeper understanding of the discourse. Since hip hop is pervasive throughout youth culture, pursuing a study on how elementary school-aged students engage with it and what this implies for their understanding of race, identity and social agency appears warranted. The results could be compared to those that have emerged from my study of secondary students to offer a fuller perspective on how hip hop influences youth in K to 12 education. Although some education stakeholders may be reluctant to engage with hip hop at the elementary level for fear that the material might not be age appropriate, I

wonder if earlier intervention could mitigate some of the racism, sexism, misogyny and homophobia that are evident once students approach the secondary school years. What kind of scaffolding of learning then needs to take place in the classroom so that younger aged students do not become desensitized to the way gender, race, and sexuality are constructed and essentialized by hip hop? How can younger students be introduced to concepts of normalization and marginalization so that bullying can be prevented earlier on in their education?

Even though all of the student participants in this research are marginalized in similar and/or varying ways and degrees by the dominant culture of *Mosaic High* and the greater society, I am also interested in exploring in greater depth, more than was possible in this current research, three particular groups that critics of hip hop point to as the most common targets of hip hop's sexism/misogyny, homophobia and racism. A separate study focusing exclusively on female, LGBT and white students' paradoxical relationship with hip hop could yield an even more extensive understanding of the contradictions that swirl around these three particular groups. In hip hop, women are regularly sexualized and objectified, LGBT people are commonly demonized and demoralized and whites are frequently ridiculed and violently threatened. How do these groups position their identity within hip hop discourse in relation to how the discourse positions them? I also wonder why are so many females as well as LGBT and white students still drawn to the discourse of hip hop and how does this problematic relationship with the art impact their own sense of identity and social agency? Incidentally, according to Abdullah (2006), white males, who endure most of hip hop's wrath, are also hip hop's greatest music buying demographic.

Throughout this research the central focus has been on the students of *Mosaic High* and their engagement with hip hop. Although learning primarily from the students' perspective was the original objective, my interview with Mr. Irshad, specifically the part where he explained how he negotiates the balance between addressing the curricular expectations and meeting the students' needs, has piqued my interest to further observe and examine more closely how he as well as other Language Arts teachers in the school district incorporate hip hop into their daily pedagogy. How does the theory inform the practice and vice versa? For example how do Mr. Irshad and his like-minded colleagues situate a hip hop pedagogy within the Secondary Language Arts curriculum based on

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traditional "core" reading and writing skills when hip hop discourse is about challenging, disrupting and countering language conventions? Moreover, what administrative and parent expectations must they consider and navigate in order to bring hip hop into the formal classroom setting? And what kinds of material resources, professional development and curricular support are available to teachers in implementing, maintaining and sustaining a hip hop pedagogy? Although Mr. Irshad's out-of-school hours rap program, *Access Denied* has been a successful outlet for students like Kalvonix, TJ and some of their peers at *Mosaic High*, Mr. Irshad is only beginning to formally transition *Access Denied's* pedagogy into his English classes to reach more of the students under his charge. Tracking the progress of how Mr. Irshad develops his hip hop program in his English classes, including its impact on the curriculum, teacher and students, as well as analyzing the successes, challenges and surprises that emerge could yield valuable data to complement this research.

8.4. *That's a Rap*: Concluding Comments

Finally, in addition to following Mr. Irshad and other teachers in the school district as they infuse hip hop into their Language Arts curriculum, I would be interested in tracking the student participants who have graduated from *Mosaic High* to see how or if hip hop continues to influence their lives after graduation. I am curious about their reflections on their past experiences with either *Access Denied,* the *Mosaic Dance Team* or *Speak* now that they are a bit older and have gained more life experience and perspectives outside the walls of *Mosaic High*. How has their past involvement and engagement with these hip hop venues continued to shape, inform and challenge their thinking and daily interaction around issues of race, identity and social agency after their departure from *Mosaic High*?

On an informal level, some of the graduates have kept in touch with me through electronic communication and/or face-to-face visits at *Mosaic High*. Through these correspondences, I have discovered that many of the student participants continue to occupy the *figured world* of hip hop in their lives beyond *Mosaic High*.

Alan, the student who was the most recent immigrant from China, initially confessed to not having much knowledge of hip hop music at the beginning of his involvement with the focus group. However, in an email correspondence from the university he is currently attending in the United States, Alan reported his continued interest in the issues centring on hip hop that we discussed during the focus group sessions. In fact, he enrolled in a course that paid some attention to the intersection of hip hop and Sociology, which he was pleased to discover serendipitously.

Daniel James, the musician who was critical of hip hop's promotion of the Gangsta identity and its bashing of whites, continues to appreciate more underground hip hop, while he writes, performs and tours around North America with his band. Periodically Daniel James returns to *Mosaic High* to visit and discuss with me some of the issues that were brought up during my one-on-one interview with him, in addition to inquiring about the progress of my research and his eagerness to read the completed thesis.

Complicity, who in her one-on-one interview shared with me the plight of her incarcerated brother because of his fascination with hip hop Gangsta Rap, wrote in an e-ail reflecting on and chronicling how challenging her graduating year was at *Mosaic High*. In reminiscing about her involvement with the research, she expressed her gratitude to me by writing, "You made me think! You had my imagination running like it was a marathon. You pushed me to want to do better and to exceed the limits." Currently, she is working towards a career in the medical profession so that she can help make a difference in the world.

S-dawg, the South Korean male hip hop dancer, is attending a university studying business. Even though his academic studies are rigorous, S-dawg still makes time for dance in his busy life, practicing, choreographing and attending performances. In fact, he has assembled a new hip hop dance crew and often participates in local hip hop dance competitions. He is also passing on his passion and skills by teaching others his craft.

Cedric, the Filipino male hip hop dancer, is also heavily involved in the dance community outside of *Mosaic High*, participating in a number of Anti-Bullying Day

conferences and events held at SFU and other local locations. Using his hip hop dance as a platform for speaking with youth, Cedric shares his experiences of being bullied and how he uses dance to access his agency. He also assists in teaching hip hop at a number of dance studios throughout the region. Because his choreography has been so well received in the local hip hop dance community, he was asked to assist in choreographing for a local junior dance group who will be competing in the upcoming World Hip Hop Dance Championships in Las Vegas, Nevada, an event that features dancers from forty-nine different countries. Cedric, along with some of his *Mosaic Dance Team* members, also competed in the competition, and became the first Canadian group to win a gold medal at the World Hip Hop Championships.

Kalvonix is using the experience, confidence and inspiration he acquired from being the lead rapper in *Access Denied* to pursue an English degree at a local university. His plan is to become a Secondary Language Arts teacher. In the meantime, he continues to write, rap, produce, record and perform his original hip hop music. In fact, he has connected with a professor in Creative Writing who is interested in his raps. In partnership with the faculty member, Kalvonix and two of his peers formed a group called "Frontier Poetics" that visits local high schools to give workshops to students on the relationship between rap and poetry. He has already conducted two such workshops at *Mosaic High*. Kalvonix was also recently featured on the front cover of the campus newspaper, which detailed how hip hop helped him better understand his disability identity. Leaving *Access Denied* has not stopped Kalvonix's dream of becoming a hip hop star. He has also recently formed a new hip hop crew and continues to compose, rehearse and perform with the members. In the most recent *Speak* event, Kalvonix returned to *Mosaic High* and gave back to the school community by performing for the audience.

Kim Park Chi, who performed a satirical piece about his South Korean identity, White Rice, who satirized his supposed lack of culture, and GermME, one of the original performers at the inaugural *Speak* event, also returned as audience members to support the new crop of student performers. Alias, the shy student who found his voice at *Speak*, not only revisited the event to reconnect with his peers, he continues to write and informally perform his spoken word pieces. He is currently doing a double major in

English and Publishing, hoping to continue to write and share his spoken word pieces, poems and raps with others.

Babs, the student who first envisioned the concept for *Speak*, returns every year to the event he brought to life, both as an advisor and mentor to the new *Mosaic High* student organizers of the event, as well as a performer of his original spoken word pieces. Like Kalvonix, Babs is also studying to become a Secondary Language Arts teacher at one of the local universities, and hopes one day to be able to teach hip hop in the classroom. In the meantime, he continues to stay active in the local Poetry Slam scene, attending and competing in events throughout the city. Not only does he continue to write original spoken word pieces, he has also recently learned to play the guitar, now adding a music component to his creations. However, his proudest accomplishment is the recent professional publication of his book that contains a collection of his hip hop inspired writing pieces. One of the pieces featured in his publication is called, "Speak," which he originally composed for the inaugural *Speak* event. "Speak" resonated so well with the audience that it has become a tradition for Babs to perform this piece every year as a way to commemorate the spirit of the event. Many of the students can relate to the character in the piece, Johnny, who is a student in a class trying to find his voice and his identity. Here, I conclude my research with Bab's "Speak."

> "No, my ideas are stupid," he says. / I know this little boy named Johnny. / He sits at the back of the class / Picking his nose / As if digging for gold / Ideas bigger than he seems / He's thought-provoking but his voice is soft-spoken / There's a little bit of little Johnny in all of us / So Johnny, you're not stupid. You're human. / And humans think. / And humans think differently than other humans. / And humans that refuse to accept that humans think differently than other humans, / Are scared / Of being human. / Even the tough slip slow sweetness into their thoughts / Like mental molasses / It just takes a bit of waiting. / Even fists thrown like rocks are hands wanting to feel / So if you've got something, or truth, to say, / Knock yourself out. / Too often, we live on "What if's" / What if I said Hi?/ What if I intervened? / What if I said that wasn't true? / What if I said I'm sorry? / What if I mustered up the macho to whisper I love you? / So don't say / You live for today, / Because that means you have twenty-four hours to procrastinate / So live for now. / For now, think about the times you wanted to / Raise your hand like it was an answer key. / And even if you didn't have the answer, / Your conviction was unquestionable. / And you became a "What if?" / So what if / You open your mouth like the words escape you / Because the click of your tongue is a whiplash? / It scares the words to leave your lips fast / Raise your hand like you're

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trading baseball cards / And you've got all the cookies / Raise your hand like it's recess, and the whole class is hungry / And you're the only one in class that has a bag full of cookies / Because you, me, him , her, WE / Still have a little bit of little Johnny inside. / And I ask him, when no one's listening / "What did you want to say?" / He says, "It'd be cool if the play / Was about a pretty little kitty cat named Luna / and a little girl named Sunshine, / and they went / on time warp adventures / in a paper Mache spaceship / to the moon / and rode around a makeshift wagon / and came across a band of aliens / and when everyone heard them smile and make music / everyone jumped on their bandwagon / and, just for fun, they had a pet clown / that lived in speech bubbles / and spoke in poetry." / He speaks / and he speaks / and he speaks / like he runs on sentences / But at least, someone other than him knows. / His ideas are so far-flung / You'd think they were gold / Johnny, you are not stupid. You're human. / And humans think. / And humans think differently than other humans / So bring the ideas at the sides of your head, front and foremost / These are called temples / So give the world something to meditate on / It might or might not / Become a poem or a song / It might be right; it might be wrong / It might be out of place or it might just belong / But never ever, ever / Be afraid to / Speak!

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Appendices

Appendix A.

Participant Profile Questionnaire

(*) Teachers were not asked to answer the marked questions below.

What is your name?

What name would you like to use for the research?

What is your gender?

What is your age?(*)

What grade are you in?(*)

How many years have you attended *Mosaic High*?(*)

Where is your country of birth?

Where is your parent(s)/guardian(s)' country of birth?(*)

Where is your ancestor's country of origin?(*)

How long have you lived in Canada?

What language(s) do you speak?

What language(s) do you speak at home?

Do you practice a religion? If so, what religion do you practice?

How would you describe your ethnic/cultural/racial background?

Do you listen to hip hop regularly?

How would you rank your knowledge of hip hop from 1 to 5, with 5 being most knowledgeable?

What are your reasons for volunteering to participate in this research?

Additional questions for teacher participants:

What subject(s) and grade(s) do you teach?

How long have you been teaching at *Mosaic High*?

Appendix B.

Interview Guiding Questions

Questions regarding hip hop:

How did you first discover hip hop?

How would you describe hip hop to someone who does not know what it is?

What do you know about the history of hip hop?

Do you know how it is different from contemporary hip hop?

What is appealing about hip hop for you?

Why do you think contemporary hip hop is such a popular musical genre today, particularly for high school students?

Which hip hop artists have influenced you and why?

What messages do you see hip hop trying to communicate?

Why do you think hip hop is such a controversial musical genre for some people, especially for some parents, teachers, politicians and other adults? Why do you think some people are critical of hip hop?

Questions regarding race and hip hop:

How would you define the word race?

How would you define the word racism?

What do you think are the characteristics that make a person racist?

Have you ever personally been a victim of racism in your own life both inside and/or outside *Mosaic High*? Can you give specific examples of when people or peers have been racist towards you? How did you respond to the racism?

What do you think hip hop is saying about race?

Questions regarding identity and hip hop:

When I say the word identity, what does it mean to you? How would you define the word?

What factors can contribute to helping to shape a person's identity?

What forces make it harder for people to form their identities?

What do you think hip hop is saying about identity?

What do you think hip hop is saying about racial identities?

What do you think hip hop is saying about sexual identity?

Questions regarding social agency and hip hop:

What does social change mean to you?

If you could imagine a better world ten years from now, what would it look like?

In your lifetime so far, what significant changes have you witnessed in our world? How have these changes impacted your own life and/or your way of looking at the world?

What would you personally like to see changed in the world and why? And would you want to participate in this change? If so, how would you participate in change?

What messages do you see hip hop communicating to young people about social change?

How would you like the Language Arts curriculum to change?

Do you see a place for hip hop in the Language Arts curriculum? If so, how do you see hip hop being used as a teaching tool for young people?

Questions regarding Access Denied, the Mosaic Dance Team & Speak:

Can you describe what *Access Denied/Mosaic Dance Team/Speak* is?

When, why and how did you get involved with *Access Denied/Mosaic Dance Team/Speak*?

How is *Access Denied/Mosaic Dance Team/Speak* influenced by hip hop?

How has *Access Denied/Mosaic Dance Team/Speak* benefitted students at the school?

How has *Access Denied/Mosaic Dance Team/Speak* personally impacted your life?

How have your peers reacted to your involvement with *Access Denied/Mosaic Dance Team/Speak*?

Questions for the teacher participants:

Why did you become a teacher?

What do you believe are the most important things we need to teach young people today?

What do you know about hip hop?

Why do you think hip hop is so popular with students?

When, why and how did you get involved with *Access Denied/Mosaic Dance Team/Speak*?

How is *Access Denied/Mosaic Dance Team/Speak* influenced by hip hop?

How has *Access Denied/Mosaic Dance Team/Speak* benefitted students at the school?

As an educator, how do you deal with the controversial/contentious/questionable aspects of hip hop?

How do you see *Access Denied/Mosaic Dance Team/Speak* being part of the formal curriculum and your teaching?

Appendix C.

But I Did (Kalvonix – *Access Denied*)

Chorus:

people said that he couldn't

BUT I DID

people said that he wouldn't

BUT I DID

people said that he shouldn't

BUT I DID

and that's why i'm sittin' on top of the world

sweet dreams are made of these, who am I to disagree

travel the world and the seven seas, everybody's lookin' for somethin'

i'm walkin' down the hallway people stare and laugh

they think that i'm a no one just because i'm handicapped

i laugh right back cuz they don't know the facts

my hustle and my struggle and my destiny to rap

kids call me cripple cuz i walk with 2 canes

they bully me they hatin' me they drive me insane

i had a dream i wuz fightin' for the fame

everyone thought of the cripple every time they heard my name so

let my friends know, music's where i wanna go

all of them said i couldn't, they said no more

all the bullies poked fun, and thought that i was dumb

as i fantasized me puttin' on a great show

i would pray everyday even when my life's slow

if i get knocked down i get right back off the floor!

they all said i couldn't but i knew i could

prove everyone wrong on the spot for good!

Chorus

back in the day before i started to rhyme

i was 7 years old back in 1999

i was singing for my family at parties all the time

and seeing me so happy made my family cry

i was a young boy who loved singing and i do it

never thought i'd be good enough to make music

age 12 knowingly, I could write poetry, everybody at my school still really doubted me

but i made them see, the true and real me, understanding who I am intellectually

be a young role model like Miley, and there's no set back with my disability

people always said i'd never make it to the mic

but i'm makin' my way and that's my only sight

i will make sure that I do this right

if you belong in the light, have dedication with your life! yea!

Chorus

Appendix D.

Magnus Opus (*Access Denied*)

S-A-D-E:

you can't deny access denied's

we need in the game like burning flames

we on fire we dangerous, for fake emcees they afraid of us

you lookin' for artists here's a must

sign access denied, we on our grind, we get shine, we won't stop till we get signed

we change the world one song at a time, we reppin' the game so remember the name

Access Denied.. AD..Kalvonix, Mr. B-E Double G, Ohwell & S-A-D-E

Four of the world's illist emcees, don't do it for the girls, throw up Bentley's

we Revolutionaries!

Mr. B-E Double G

i'm an individual like a brontosaurus rex

eat my cheerios mixed with chexmexnex

yabadaba doo now i'm saved by the bell

and if I show up late zack and screech won't tell

jellybeans, dinosaurs, and donuts

got a rabbit's foot natrix are made for grown ups

haters on the freeze like an ice cream twirl

start more gossip than a gilmore girl

Kalvonix:

Grown ups all like me cuz i'm doin' no wrong

Access Denied change the world in 1 song

you know I got swag no need for a bandana

got the best of both worlds like I'm Hannah Montana

the girls all like me cuz i'm nice and short

the number of legs I got the same as a horse

slow and steady wins the race like turtoise and the hare

meet me at the finish cuz i'm already there

Ohwell:

there ain't no breaks but i still like Kit Kat

we fresher than any beat call us tic tac

shot for shot king but were not mannypac

not trogens but we did a sneak attack

right on each other in a game of tag

solve this problem now, i don't just brag

put the music to your ear like a phone

next rapper if you don't like my tone

S-A-D-E

i'm Elias Sade, I love Hip Hop

i ain't gettin paid, but I will never stop

steady writin' these tracks, for hip hop's sake

a hundred percent real, cuz i don't know fake

whenever i rap i ain't a human i'm a math, for the loss and for the sad

i'm a consolation for this generation, for any broken soul, change the world is my goal

rap savior is my roll...***Continued next page...***

Mr. B-E Double G:

we don't support violence, we don't promote hate

we come to school early, we end up leaving late

hard work hustlin', just to make a track

finished up the hook now we never lookin' back

if you like what you hear, then tell 'em what you heard

i thought I saw a pussycat, Tweety the bird

the loony toon bunny, was born a tiny toon

it's never too late and it's never too soon!

Kalvonix:

everywhere i go, everybody all lovin'

the girls love me like they lovin' edward cullen

you can't hate me cuz u know i make it hot

me and rap are friends like donuts and a cop

mr begg oh well and the kid all cool

and Kalvonix is the rapper of the school

the school still questions me they still have doubt but i have made it from here on ouuut!

Ohwell:

outline this beat i'm a true sharpe

answer your call in a heartbeat

i could rip any beat apparently

we change their minds that's a guarantee

Appendix E.

The Bubble Tea Family (*Speak*)

The Bubble Tea Gangsta:

Wake up in the morning feeling like Hello-Kitty

Got my glasses

I'm out the door

Going to Richmond City

Slushie Sistas:

Oh, oh, oh, oh X2

The Bubble Tea Gangsta:

Don't stop Bubble Pop

Eating yummy Suey Chop

Tonight Imma gonna bite

Into rice with all my might

Tik Tok on the dot

Curfew time 8 O'Clock

Slushie Sistas:

Yo, yo, yo, yo

Yo, yo, yo, yo

The Bubble Tea Gangsta:

Yo-Yo Ma

I'm the Bubble Tea Gangsta

Original Asian pranksta

Superstar badminton playa

Tonight I am here to thank ya

Give it up for my Bubble Tea Sistas

Show some love to my Bubble Tea Brothas

Seoul of Korea

Great Wall of China

And Philippina

We come from the East

We only want peace

We are one big happy

Bubble Tea Family

Slushie Sistas:

Chorus:

We are family,

I got all my sistas with me

We are family

Get up everybody and see

We are family

I got all my brothas with me

We are family

The Bubble Tea Family

The Bubble Tea Gangsta:

Alright stop collaborate and listen

Tea's back with a brand new addition

Filipino Jalapeño

He's my homie from the Philippines

He's a shortie only seventeen

He so trim

He so nice

We call him

Manila Ice

Continued next page...

Yo Manila kick it one time boy

If there's a problem yo he'll solve it

Check out the hook while Manila revolves it

Slushie Sistas:

Manila ice ice baby X 4

Manila Ice:

Pullin' off the fake Nikes jean shorts and that's not all

Rockin' flip flops struttin' at five feet tall

We eat the home-cooked meals five times a day

Us Filipinos just hate to pay

From mangoes to pork feet to chicken adobo

It's all about ballot just take it and go-go

We eat the weird stuff even ice cream in buns

Only to rep those three stars and one sun

We got pianos guitars and Karaoke machines

We have a good time if you know what I mean

Filipino time's not at nine but a ten

From Journey to hours of Boys II Men

"I'll make love to you, like you want me to" x2

Dreaming of singers dancers famous icons

We all listen to 80s love songs

When it comes to our parents we know they're all boss

No disrespect or hangers they'll toss

Straight outta high school we get into nursing

Pleasing our parents before they start cursing

Back to the Phils where we live off the land

A life of poverty far from bland

We got our cheap clothes flat noses and dark brown skin

I'm proud to represent from my heads to my shins

"I'll make love to you, like you want me to..."

Slushie Sistas:

"And I'll hold you tight, baby all through the night, I'll make love to you..."

Chorus

The Bubble Tea Gangsta:

Kim Park Chi

Related to me

Kim Park Chi

Only five feet three

Kim Park Chi

Drinks lots of hot tea

Kim Park Chi

Yellow like his pee X3

Kim Park Chi:

Hey I'm a DDR master or a human calculator

And I don't live under a strict rule

Or eat rice everyday

And own a Civic

And I don't know Kevin Lee, Jenny Zhou or Kevin from Asia

Although I'm certain they're really, really nice

I don't own a laundry mat

And I don't go to UBC

At home I call them umma and appa

And yes SFU does stand for "so you failed UBC"

In Korea I have a president, not a dictator

I speak Korean and English, not Konglish

And no I'm not from North Korea

Say that again and I will cave your face in

I can proudly own Asian pencils in by backpack

I believe in the Olympics not the NBA

That Apollo Ohno cheated during the 06 games

And that Kim Yu Na is truly the greatest and proudest skater of them all

And no mom I don't want to become a doctor

Or a nurse or a lawyer

I hate playing the violin

And playing ping pong all day

I don't have a Cyworld

Wear thick glasses and a scarf

And it is pronounced phu

Not pho...phu

Asia is the world's largest continent

The 1st to produce silk and chopsticks

And the best players in the Starcraft industry

My name is Kim

And I am YELLOW

Slushie Sistas:
Chorus

The Bubble Tea Gangsta:

Yo Pop Suey

You got to

Get into the groove

Boy you gotta prove

Your moves to me

Yo Pop Suey

Get up on your feet

Yeah step to the beat

Boy what will it be?

Come on POP

Let your body move to the music

Hey, hey, hey

Come on LOCK

Let your body go with the flow

You know you can do it

Breakdown

S-dawg dances...

The Bubble Tea Gangsta:

Wake up in the morning feeling like Hello-Kitty

Got my posse

I'm out the door

With my Bubble Tea Family

Everyone:
Chorus

White Rice:
HOWDY Y'ALL!

Wo hui shuo pu tong hua! *(I can speak Chinese)*

I know what you're thinking: QUOI?!

Ni chi le wo de hou zi means you ate my monkey

With this denial of friendship my heart has a-sunky

Isa, dalawa, tatlo (1, 2, 3)

My spirit's been cut low

Yi, er, san (1, 2, 3)

We don't have to look the same to have fun

Would you deny me now

If you know I liked Jay Chou?

Andrew Garcia's a friend of a friend

It hurt me too when his time on American Idol did end

We can all mix together like one big stew

Because I want nobody, nobody, nobody but you!

Everyone:

Chorus

Appendix F.

Hip Hop is MORE (AJO – *Speak*)

My back is against the wall

World against me-shit

Rebel without a cause

Only force working with meee, is Jeeesus

I am embellished without a flaw

Like a felon without a job

So helpless and outta luck; I'm reckless

Can't help it if I don't give a fuck

I'm 50's nonsense; his last album "Before I self-Destruct"

My guilty conscience is not aware of outcomes

I rhyme about whatever comes first to my head

So I could care lesssss

About wallet splurging, or if my pocket's hurting in debt

Other rappers praise the Almighty Dollar

Which they worship instead

Of Allah or the Almighty Father

I'm continuing the work of a legend through her

Hip hop, no NOT Muhammad Ali's daughter

I'm probably smarter than most these cats

I'd probably be the product of if Kobe rapped

Or the '03 Shaq, smell me?

You better get your nose in check

You can't hold me back

I'm Emily Rose possessed

Each day is a villainous threat

My rhythm is yet to be feeling the sweat

My lyricism is ruthless living with no regrets

My older brother is the Lakers and

I'm feeling I'm Clippers getting no respect

No I'm not talking barbers, but regardless

Me and rap are like Edward Scissorhands and hair

Cuz I'll wreck ya lineup just as bad as LeBron leaving the Cavaliers

I use hip hop to try and find myself

Mainstream artists work Nine-to-Five for sales

Tryna make 'em more

Pfft...these corporate, dirty fuckers

I do this from the heart working Eight-to-Four (8,2,4)

Kobe's jersey's numbers

Let's switch it up

To a subject I haven't touched yet

I hate the government

Politics just gonna lie to me

They put billions to the Olympics

Instead of poverty stricken societies

Media make us think and act the way we should

Then they let rapists and child offenders come back into our neighbourhoods

What is this bullshit?

They had enough money for soldiers to shoot

Then die in heaven

I'll expose the truth

George Bush planned 9/11

Continued next page...

He cared about the weapons of mass destruction

That weren't even there

Meanwhile hospital patients, third world countries

And Katrina victims wondered if the world even cared

If you disagree that I'm musically gifted

Then you don't even believe that illuminati existed

The proof's in the pie

The truth's in the sky

Let me reveal the truth it might scare ya

Lady Liberty holds a torch

And Lucifer means light-bearer

Think about it

But let's not get too serious and mythological

Look I'm hypnotical with the follicles

Illogical, unprobable sollubles that'll follow you

Like theoretical, incredible, edible,

Illuminative; proving this, my exuberance

And foolishness, how am I doing this?

None of that made sense

But it sure sounded intelligent

They're lying if they say hip hop is irrelevant

Let's be honest kids

You think this genre is

All whips, hoes, and dope?

Topics that'll always be hot

We use to be politics

But now you think we're just "hip"

And hope is all we got

Possibly, but H.E.R., she's prone to be

Shit not in stores

Drop the "e," her face is scarred

I'll show you that hip hop is MORE