AFRICAN AMERICAN HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

IN A SPACE OF CREATIVE ENGAGEMENT:

FROM CAN'T TO CAN

by

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ABSTRACT

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Carla Marie Becker

Most North American high-school music programs require participation within the traditional band/choir/orchestra paradigm. Research suggests, however, that many African American students feel disconnected from course offerings like these. Rejecting school-based music education, many African American youth are actively engaged in community-based programs, creating, producing, writing, and practicing various art forms of their own interest, becoming producers of knowledge and culture. Some researchers have investigated arts programs that attract African American students through spoken word, Hip Hop, and gospel ensembles, resulting in high levels of engagement and participation. Few, however, have studied school-based programs that offer experiences in multiple, creative, and multi-faceted art platforms. Using qualitative research methods, this study investigated an exemplary program, the High School for Recording Arts, St. Paul, Minnesota, which has a track record of attracting, retaining, and graduating African

American students. The researcher explored how racial identity is expressed and negotiated through creative engagements with multimodal art forms. Troubling standardized discourses around student success – norms which are derivative of white middle class values –high levels of engagement and self-actualization were discovered, which were linked to myriad musical and artistic processes. The findings indicate that African American students who had previously displayed disengaged behavior in schools, flourished when they were offered the space and freedom to explore. Students became increasingly sophisticated musicians, multi-modal producers, entrepreneurs, critical thinkers, world travelers, community activists, producers of knowledge, and self-initiated learners. Findings indicate that it is possible to create an arts/music program that encourages such development by implementing unique and innovative school structures, policies, curricula, and pedagogy. Moreover, it is clear that race matters in education. Yet, diverse conceptions of race and the performance of race were not easily characterized by researcher, students, or school administration. Implications, especially around race, speak to important contemporary issues in music education with regard to policy, school structure, curricula, instruction, student relationships, and creative production.

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Mom and Dad who are with me in spirit, blessing me with fortitude and strength.

Aisha: You are my strength, heart, and inspiration
Jodi: You are loved and appreciated

Aisha, I remember when *you* were getting ready to graduate from high school, and we were excited for our change in life. We came to Columbia to see if the school was right for you. While we were taking the tour at Columbia, I was the one who was invigorated. I loved it. Only months later did I even think about applying. Time passed, you graduated High School and we packed up our stuff and moved to NYC. We were both to begin a new journey in college. I will always cherish the times we packed our backpacks and hiked to the library to study, or our coffee trips to keep ourselves "focused." I love when we would meet in the cafeteria for a meal, or go to Massawa and complain about how it wasn't as good as Seattle Ethiopian, but we loved every bite anyway, in memory of Seattle. I know you sacrificed in this process for me too, and I appreciate all you have done, for us. It was a blessing and a journey that can never be re-lived.

Jodi, you are amazing. I can never express my extreme gratitude for you. Thank you for your support, your phone calls, your love, and your friendship. Thank you.

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Chapter I

FROM CAN'T TO CAN

A slight reverberation echoes throughout the room while the only female in the class sits at the computer playing a cooled Hip Hop beat. It is loud enough to hear, and respectful enough for others to talk. Inside this room, there is life and joy: Larger than life-size student hand-drawn portraits are on the walls—of musical icons, from Ray Charles to Bob Marley, and Michael Jackson to Whitney Houston. They bring a collage of melodies to my ears. I hear funk, drums trumpets, and reggae. Marvin Gaye asks me, "What's going on?" Each picture is perfectly finished, just so imperfectly. Miles Davis gets a glimpse of daily activities from his poster. Today, he observes 12 male students in a loosely knit circle, chillin', listening to the DJ, and giving accounts of their weekends while simultaneously checking their cell phones. They are waiting for class to begin.

Niles, the teacher enters with his enthusiastic voice that ignites the room with energy. This is the signal for the female DJ to turn off the music as students sit up, straighten their bodies, look up, look around, and focus. They know that their mission for the day is to choose a name for their newly recorded CD. Niles greets them, takes a little time for small talk, and begins:

> All right, y'all, let's begin. Let's listen to a few songs from the CD to help us brainstorm and pick a title. But *you* guys are going to come up with the name. So the first song I want you all to listen to again is, "The Next Move.

He starts the song and I see a combination of humility and pride revealed as students' bodies loosen, heads bob, and slight smiles emerge. An ear-to-ear smile crosses Niles' face though as he glances at Dean who's verse just began:

Verse 1: (Student 1: Dean)

> I'm never chillin', the money's what my mind is on
> And I never write flow stupid because my mind is gone
> Illuminati on my heels so I got to run
> And I'll never stop until that hill is what my mom is on
> Why did Aliyah take that plane? Why did Left Eye get in that lane?
> Why did Tupac go to the Veg[as]? Why did Big go back to L.A.?
> Damn, damn/Why did Pimp C pick up that drink?
> When Mike Jack died I swear to God I couldn't think…

Niles stops the recording, smiles, and comments, "Man, that was deep. I'm so proud of you. You went back in *history*, man." Dean takes the compliment and returns his acknowledged satisfaction with a smile as Niles directs, "Tell them about the process of making that song." Dean offers:

> He [as he points to Niles] dragged me in and said, 'I really like this beat,' so I said, 'OK, let me write something to it.' But then I got distracted. I didn't write my verse on the first day, so the next day I wrote my verse in, like, 15 minutes.

Deez, another student who is also apparently on the album, jumps in:

> Yeah, I just went in the studio and you [Dean] were about ready to record, so I was like 'cool.' He played the beat, and I said, 'I can write something to this, quick.' So I wrote it real quick.

Everybody laughs, understanding that producing something here can be like that: spontaneous. Niles laughs, "Deez, you tore it up, too!" he says as he pushes play again. Deez' verse begins.

Verse 2: (Student 2: Deez)

> Your next move, better be your best move,
> Better yet a chess move
> I think like I'm old school

Tryin' to get my future tight
My present ain't lookin' right
Think I need to change it up
Maybe try a different time
Maybe get another job, a 9 to 5
Work until my hands get tired
Think I need less attitude
Maybe be a different dude
Pass a normal latitude wherever that I'm passing through
I'm trying to be a pacifist I don't want to blast the clip
Because I got so much knowledge that they call me activist
Or just call me prodigy
Yatta-Deez is probably, contemplating master plans
I'm trying to buy Monopoly, you stopping me?
Naw, I'm working so hard

As his verse comes to an end, classmates smile and nod in appreciation, showing me how support and encouragement in this school is active and alive. After most of the CD is reviewed, the students' excitement is nestled between humility and pride. Yet, by the end of the class, they still haven't chosen a title for the CD—instead, they finish with their designated freestyle cipher time.

They gather in a small circle in the corner of the room. A student picks a beat from the closest computer, making the rest of the students bop and sway and it's obvious they're beginning to create verses silently in their heads, ready to *spit* a spontaneous act of improvisation because I see eyes focus and minds sharpen. Niles holds up an i-Pad to record and he begins the round by introducing "The next one of mic is OC Crazy," and the bass-ridden beat plays on.

Student 1:

Yeah, yeah, can you vision the land full of all white sand . . .

This freestyle cipher continues for about 20 minutes, where students are actively engaged in improvising and exploring in the interactive free-flowing space. Engaging

artistic programs do, in fact, exist under the radar, but traditional music education might never see these students.

Getting to Can, Refusing Can't

Research suggests that African American youth are often disengaged by public-school music education programs (Benedict, 2005; Hinckley, 1995). Most music programs require participation within the traditional band/choir/ orchestra paradigm based on western classical art music (Allsup & Benedict, 2008; Jorgensen, 2003a), which may create a disconnect for African American youth who are actively engaged in creating, producing, writing, and practicing art forms of their *own* interest, becoming producers of knowledge (Hoechsmann & Sefton-Green, 2006b; Morrell, 2011). The lack of engaging artistic experiences available to African American high school students in the public school system, combined with the lack of encouragement that fosters open and expressive self-representation often relegates students to explore their artistic identities outside of public-school contexts. Although in-school programs that specifically address African American experience do exist, they are rare and are often challenged by leadership and policy makers (Seidel, 2011).

I borrow from Geneva Gay's (2010) "From Can't to Can" (p. 23) due to the significance of exploring an arts program that is attracting, engaging, and retaining African American youth, youth once disengaged in their educational experience. This provides insight on teaching, pedagogy, and curricula that increase educational engagement. It is valuable to know what these students appreciate about their education

as they explore, transform, and re/construct themselves as racial and artistic beings in this creative space.

Scholars agree that matters of race co-exist within educational experience (Howard, 2010; Irvine, 1990). Yet they suggest that racism, in the form of embedded pedagogical practices, curriculum, and educator biases, inhibits participation in musical and other artistic expression within the school context. Karen Teel and Jennifer Obidah (2008) state: "Addressing these issues of racism and racial and cultural inequities is crucial to the success for African American students in particular" (p. 5). Macro-level racially biased inequities within U.S. education are often associated with mandated testing, accountability scores, course offerings, state standardized curriculum, and student tracking (Anyon, 2006; Ayers, 2006). Nasir et al. (2008) agree that African American student disengagement is often caused by: "academic tracking, racial discrimination, bureaucratized relationships, and barriers to information" (p. 77). Analysis of macro-level injustices can attempt to identify the micro-level effects of the kinds of pedagogy, curriculum, and teaching that deplete students of creative and racially encouraging experiences of learning (Irvine, 1990).

This racialized educational experience has not prevented African American youth from creating and becoming producers of art. Few countries are untouched by African American musical contributions, including jazz, blues, gospel, and emcee battles. Hip Hop is a most recent African American youth-generated musical genre that originates from Black experience, and it is crossing borders around the globe. Patricia Hill-Collins (2006) states, "Hip Hop culture is a global phenomenon, [and] Black American youth remain its most visible ambassadors" (p. 2-3), while Michael Eric Dyson (2001)

reinforces this notion: “If urban poverty were eliminated and young black males were given their rightful place in society, then Tupac’s music might quickly become a historical artifact from a dark national nightmare” (p. xiii). In other words, without “black males . . . given their rightful place in society,” Tupac’s music might never have been as acclaimed as it was—Hip Hop may never have been created. In short, these scholars believe that racial, political, social, and economic inequities affect African American creative productivity.

Hip Hop is not the only artistic genre born of African American descent that has gone global, or that engages in social and political discourse. Jazz too was born from African American experimentation within an unjust society—I think of John Coltrane and Miles Davis, who rebelled against the normative sounds of Big Band music. The blues; “was a music that developed because of the adaption to, and adoption of, America, it was also a music that developed because of the Negro’s peculiar position in this country” (Jones, 1963, p. 66). Authors suggest that social/political positioning and racial experience affect musical output and production (Dyson, 2001; Jones, 1963). In regard to music education, Julia Koza (1999) states, “Ignoring or denouncing popular culture—the culture of the people—sends elitist messages about whose understandings of the world do or do not count, both in schools and in the dominant culture” (p. 65). She also acknowledges the conflict in what music-education policy both implicitly and explicitly determines worthy of study, which perpetuates the omission of a varied musical experience.

In this study, I went in search of a public school setting that afforded African Americans the opportunity to explore their lives, and express themselves through art and

music, with varied musical experiences. An inquiry into programs that are attracting African American youth participation—be it through popular culture, spoken word, music performance, or music production, ultimately calls into question the standardization of music education. Standardizations often ignore how student engagement and learning can be supported in arts program that support a racial/social/political lived experience. For this reason, I question what is happening in a particular High School to encourage educational engagement through artistic expression? What exactly is this school *doing*, through pedagogy and curriculum, to encourage such exploration? Are students portraying a racial/social/political lived experience that supports student engagement?

I conducted research at the High School for Recording Arts (HSRA) in St. Paul, Minnesota. It is a Charter High School designed to engage students through music. In 2014, Over 95% of the student body is African American.

I have arrived at some assumptions that will affect my research. The first is that African American youth prefer to be engaged in their formal education. I believe that African Americans experience racism in education through course-tracking, mandated curricula, lack of relevance to their lived experiences, lack of engaging coursework, teacher bias, and low expectations. I believe it is possible to engage and empower African American students through relevant pedagogy that incorporates deep thinking and interdisciplinary connections. I believe that African American students feel engaged and empowered when they are able to express themselves as individual beings.

I know that exemplary artistic programs do exist that incorporate relevant pedagogy and freedom of racial expression that include performance, encourage critically

deep thinking, and offer interdisciplinary artistic exploration. But too little research is conducted in this area. I also know that exemplary teaching philosophies and practices exist that purposefully engage African American youth by providing an engaging environment, attributing to a student's productive contribution, and ultimately leading to graduation. But again, too little research has documented such achievements. I want to move away from the discourses of *can't* to the possibilities of can.

Purpose

In this study, I examine how African American youth at the High School for Recording Arts express racial identity through music and the arts. I explore how the school's philosophies are illustrated through the teaching, learning, and curricula, and what the school's means and ends are. I explore what experiences youth-participants find valuable in this setting that assist them in their goals for graduation and beyond.

I hope to provide some direction for expanding and enriching the curricular and pedagogical offerings of schools that serve an increasingly diverse student demographic—most specifically, for African American youth. By constructing engaging opportunities through more dynamic and creative learning environments, and borrowing from Geneva Gay (2010), there is probability in moving from "Can't to Can" (p. 23).

Background

My interest in this topic arose while I was living in Seattle raising my teenage daughter. She identifies herself as Afro-Caribbean/African American, and gravitates toward people of similar racial and economic identities. During her high school adolescence, due to the lack of artistic opportunities available within the school system,

she and many of her friends sought out creative opportunities that were abundant in the artistic community of Seattle. This led me to attend self-initiated teenage-organized art shows, poetry events, spoken-word events, pop, rock, and Hip Hop shows. I witnessed students create opportunities for themselves as artists, becoming the narrators of their own stories.

As a music teacher in the public schools, I wondered why we rarely encouraged or allowed students the space to create, explore, and narrate their merging, emerging, forming, and informing identities. I wondered why our music-education courses often stifled creative endeavors, when music is commonly understood as a creative art form.

I was working at a local middle school that fed into the neighboring high school, which was historically dominated by African Americans. Recent gentrification had equalized the school's racial demographics, yet the award-winning jazz bands of the middle school and high school remained 99% White. The high school's music program was comprised of more than 300 members, approximately 96% of whom were White and middle-class Asians, which replicated the racial demographics in the advanced placement program. To address the inequitable school experience for students of color, an after-school and Saturday "Black Scholars" program was created. This program was considered an advanced placement program for Black students, but it restricted enrollment to only 30 African American students from the entire city—a clear-cut social injustice that allocated space for only a select few.

Since the music program at the middle school catered to the Advanced Placement students, I was hired to teach the students with ethnic, racial, linguistic, and cultural minority status—in other words, the "others" (Delpit, 1995). I was assigned to a

seventh/eighth-grade general music course for predominantly African American and ESL students. I was hired a week before school started and had little time to prepare, so I began the year teaching the way that the dominant culture traditionally teaches general music: by using piano, pens, and papers. That lasted for only two class sessions. During my lapse of good judgment, all I heard were, "Ugh . . . why do we have to learn this?" and "I don't care about this. . . . " I, too, was frustrated, and I was aware that I was going against my own teaching philosophy. I was reinforcing what Goodwin (2010) said:

> Curriculum often informs both what is to be taught and how the teaching should occur. However, *Curriculum* is much more than subject matter content and instructional procedures. Curriculum embodies a society's implicit consensus around what is worth knowing and what is worthwhile. (p. 3111)

I came to realize I had to create my own curriculum if I wanted to make the semester a memorable one. So I thought deeply about what my students might be interested in learning and decided that Bach and Beethoven might not be what they needed at that time. I wanted to interest the students through music genres that my assumptions (rightly or wrongly) led me to think they had a sense of connection to, racially and historically. So I created a music-history course based on the African American musical journey. I also utilized my experience with my daughter in community-based programs to understand what many African American youth were artistically exploring on their own accord. Over time, I began to observe that my students were engaged, making connections, finding relevance to their lives and excited.

I have recounted this story to clarify my interest in this research. I have witnessed how utilizing curriculum that engages, intrigues, and empowers African American students can facilitate active participation within a formal music education experience. In addition, I witnessed the creative and artistic exploration of many African American

students, who shared and even demanded a space for their artistry outside of the school context—in informal community centers, rented halls, basements, and coffee shops. I was reminded of the birth of jazz, the blues, and Hip Hop as I observed students exploring their shaping identities and interests. I have witnessed African American students' enthusiasm for popular cultural production, which they usually identify with through a racial experience; but I have also witnessed school programs that disengage African American youth through systemic practices that maintain traditional pedagogy and curriculum, ultimately diminishing contributions from African American artistic sources. The latter, I'm afraid, is the norm.

Research Site and Questions

Research was conducted at The High School for Recording Arts (HSRA), a Charter School in St. Paul, Minnesota. It has over 20 professionals as teachers, advisors, and support staff. There are 250 plus students and more than 98% are African American. It has three recording studios, an editing lab, a film and photography editing room, beat making lab, a stage and performance area with instruments on demand. Classrooms and advisory areas have multiple computers where Math, Science, and English are part of daily activities. I go further into detail about the site in Chapter III and IV.

The identified research questions include:

(1) *Institutional Identity and Race*: *How* does HSRA foster purposeful exploration of racial identity? What institutional structures inhibit identity development and well-being?

(2) *Race, Identity, and Creativity*: How does creativity foster the exploration and development of learner identity? *How* do African American students—assuming they do—express their racial identity through their creative work?

(3) *Pedagogy*: How are HSRA's philosophies illustrated through the teaching and learning process? What pedagogical means are enacted to attend to student learning and engagement? What are its intended ends?

(4) *Curriculum*: What curricula are implemented to attend to student learning and engagement? What are its intended ends?

Conceptual Frameworks

Creating the research questions assisted in forming the conceptual and theoretical frameworks represented in Figure 1. My conceptual framework illustrates how racial identity is the core framework around which other concepts interlink. The arrows around the framework signify the fluidity of motion between each element in the research. Racial identity also connects the three theoretical frameworks. It links to Critical Race Theory (CRT) in terms of how macro-level political implementations affect students' educational experiences—as well as how racial identity addresses micro-level program/school-based policies and implemented curricula that affect students' music educational experiences. It also links to Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP) when considering students' experiences through the lenses of pedagogy, curricula, and learning implications. And it relates to performing identities' theoretical framework in considering how African American students explore, express, and become producers of the arts. First however, I explain research frameworks of creativity and exemplary sites.

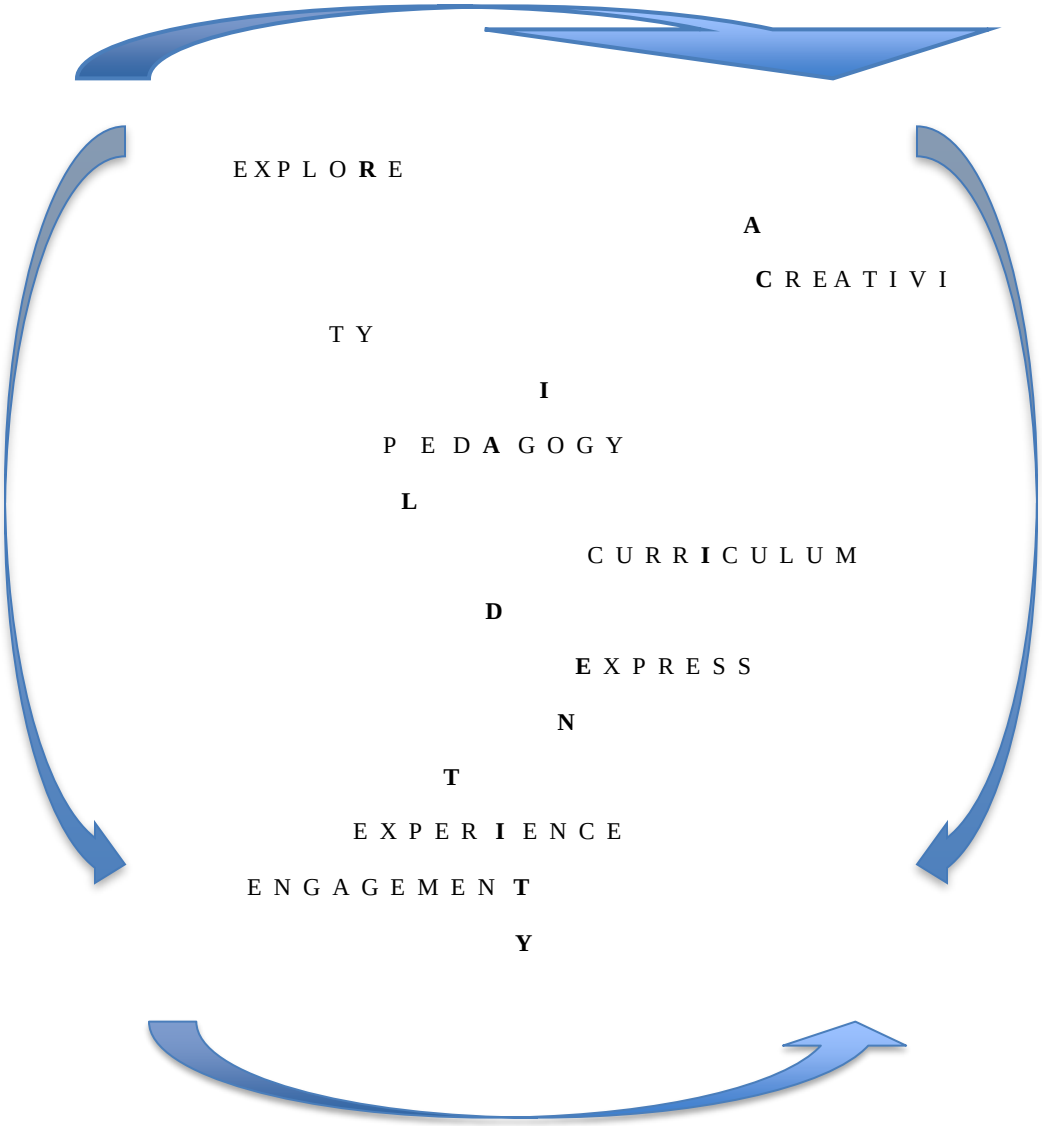

Figure 1. Conceptual framework

Creativity Framework

Creativity is not a theoretical framework analyzed in the literature review, it is necessary to claim what notions of creativity will be used for analysis in this research. I am not interested in domain innovations and I do not consider Howard Gardner's approach, one that considers the intersections of creativity and *multiple intelligences* (1997). Nor am I interested in the psychology theorists of mental properties—like reasoning, memorization, and attentiveness. Although there is validity to each of these approaches, without naivety, yet I remain committed to exploring creativity through expression as it explores a socio-political-racial criticality through emotions and lived experiences (Greene, 1995; Maslow, 1958). These scholars, in their various ways support this framework. Green's (1995) *Releasing the Imagination* speaks of the arts as an instrument to engage and create a consciousness with self and community. She claims schools:

> . . . ought to resound with the voice of articulate young people in dialogues always incomplete because there is always more to be discovered and more to be said. We must want our students to achieve friendships as each one stirs to wide-awakeness, to imaginative action, and to renewed consciousness of possibility. (p. 43)

Always incomplete, discovering, imagination combined with a consciousness of self and others, is creativity in action for change. Maslow (1958) speaks of creativity being, spontaneous, and a source of freedom, alienated from stereotypical representation. I am interested in understanding how the production students are engaging in, begin to shape and create them. It doesn't matter if the creativity is spontaneous, or rehearsed, domain, innocent, or banal, but instead, the greater wholeness of the creative process is

the focus. It is about the creative act in expressing who they are, their identities, their realities, their thoughts, and their creations.

Exemplary Research Framework

Ladson-Billings (1995a) and Lawrence-Lightfoot (1985) have looked at exemplary teaching sites and pedagogues. Ladson-Billings (1995a) found that exemplary teachers incorporated similar teaching techniques and philosophies that, above all, encouraged the academic success of African American children. Although the definition of *success* has been challenged (Gay, 2010; Lipman, 1995), and juxtaposed against the notion of *achievement*, Ladson-Billings' initial research was in search of the effective teaching of African American students.

As a result of that search, she identified a common teaching philosophy that embraced a caring environment, in which teachers were personally accountable for themselves and for the learning of their students. Moreover, these teachers implemented a cooperative learning pedagogy where students recognized a responsibility for one another, the school, and the community. Both the students and the teachers analyzed the curriculum critically, while teachers used multiple-assessment strategies to ensure student learning (Ladson-Billings, 1995a). She concluded that achievement-based exemplary teaching for African American students is "in relation to self and other, social relations, and knowledge" (p. 238).

Another influential contributor of exemplary institutional and teaching practice is Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot (1983), who researched *Good High-School(s)* to look for the "good" that exists in education (p. 5). Likewise, Howard Gardner (1997) states the importance of finding locations and places of good examples:

> . . . first of all people have to see examples of places that are like their own places where the new kind of education really works, where students are learning deeply, where they can exhibit their knowledge publicly, and where everybody who looks at the kids says, "That's the kind of kids I want to have." So we need to have enough good examples. (April 10th, 2014. Retrieved from http://www.edutopia.org/multiple-intelligences-howard-gardner-video)

I bring in Thomas Hatch (2009) who gives descriptive accounts of six schools through an analysis and inquiry into how mandated reforms cause change, and their effects of improvement. The descriptions give cause to what is working, and what is not.

Student Voice

There is a general tendency to overlook students' voices, thoughts, and ideas in attempting to reveal what is working and what is not working for students' in their educational experience (Cook-Sather, 2002). Jones and Yonezawa (2010) recognize that student perspectives are hardly acknowledged in matters related to their educational experience and ultimately in connection with school change and reform. They used informal focus groups to allow students to freely express and "mediate(s) [their] understanding of their high school experience, particularly curriculum, instruction, learning, and relationships with teachers and counselors" (p. 248). This form of qualitative research led the researchers to conclude that through dialogue, students were able to make sense of their educational experience and that dialogue "disrupts and transforms historical patterns of unequal education for disadvantaged students" (p. 248).

With regard to music education, Hill (2005) his dissertation did not specifically speak of his own experience with Hip Hop in a formalized music education experience, but he did acknowledge that through Hip Hop, he "found pride in my Blackness and no longer desired to assimilate into the culture of the White students at the school I

attended" (p. 7). An assimilation "into the culture of White students" as an African American, partially silences individual strengths and partially ignores the possibility of contribution. It is hoped that an awareness of student assimilation and the discount of student insight, will begin to move educators from upholding a preferred pedagogy, to one that remove structures of silencing voice. It is worthy to consider how race, performing identities, and a school of engagement co-exist to encourage student flourishing—ultimately to provide a place where students can express and not be silenced.

Theoretical Frameworks

Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory (CRT) emerged in the 1970s, catapulted by the civil rights movement. Originating from Critical Legal Studies (CLS), lawyers, political activists, and scholars claimed that the legal system was racially biased. CRT scholars were propelled to organize in an attempt to influence and reform the racially biased system. Key figures in this movement were Derrick Bell, Charles Lawrence, Linda Greene, Neil Gotanda, and Richard Delgado, who were identified as "the firsts to address the law's treatment of race from a self-consciously critical perspective" (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller & Thomas, 1995, p. xxi).

As recently as the early 1990s, CRT merged into other forms of scholarship, including education, where it addresses racially biased macro-level educational policies that affect micro-level teacher practices. CRT in education, like the beginning of CRT in legal studies, utilizes race as the unit of analysis to further understand how race and

educational experiences intersect. More specifically, CRT music-education scholars such as Deborah Bradley (2006), Julia Koza (2007), Darlene Sampson and Dorothy Garrison-Wade (2011) explore the effects of race and racism within the music-education construct. Their scholarship contributes to the research on racial experience, educational successes, and educational biases in the music education field.

Utilizing CRT as a theoretical perspective for my research serves multiple functions. First, it will situate race as a primary component of analyzing how students express their artistry while wrestling with society's larger injustices: Students attend school with a lived racial experience of in/justice and it is probable that creative expression is based on a racialized experience. Second, using CRT will regard race as a primary area of concern when viewing programs of engagement that are seen as exemplary rather than deficient: from can't to can. Since the program chosen for this research represents an exemplary model of education, where policies and pedagogical practices are implemented that intentionally or inadvertently attracted African American youth, CRT's perspective centers on policies of achievement and engagement. Pauline Lipman (1995) reiterates a connection between CRT's role in educational reform and a racialized student experience: "If educational reform is to benefit all students, we need to learn from the practice of teachers …and the role of exemplary teachers of African American students in educational change" (p. 201).

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995a), one of CRP's founders, "looked and listened to exemplary teachers of African American students" (p. 477). Recognizing the lack of discourse on what factors constitute effective teachers of African American students and

engaged African American students, Ladson-Billings wished to understand deeply what teachers were doing pedagogically to successfully engage African American students. To achieve this, she sought out recommendations from principals, parents, and students for educators who were publically known to be "effective" teachers of African American students. Through the process of examining these exemplary teachers of African American students, who embraced common philosophies and techniques that encouraged academic success, utilized culturally competent curriculum/practices, and helped develop students' sociopolitical consciousness, she formulated the theory of CRP:

> A next step for positioning effective pedagogical practice is a theoretical model that not only addresses [African American] student achievement but also helps students to accept and affirm their cultural identity while developing critical perspectives that challenge inequities schools perpetuate. (p. 469)

This quote is relevant to unmasking how pedagogical practices implemented by this exemplary program affect students' desire for engagement—which may show increased student achievement when students are able to affirm their cultural identity. Music education might find a space for culturally relevant pedagogy by considering *how* one teaches, which includes analyzing the dynamics between teachers and students, particularly with respect to professional caring, spontaneous responsiveness in the classroom, and creation of learning environments within a music education context. CRP also considers *what* one teaches, both in terms of daily lesson-plan development and the relevance of curriculum to students' life experiences.

CRP's core philosophy focuses on the possibilities for increased African American academic achievement through pedagogical practices and curricula that increase engagement and affirm cultural competence. Curriculum with a CRP emphasis has the potential to utilize material from lived experience, while encouraging critical

thinking through multi-disciplinary connectedness and ultimately encouraging high-level learning goals. Choosing *what* or *how* to develop lesson plans or activities can determine the effectiveness and strength of CRP. For educators, it has the potential to resist the practices that continue to dominate our music education field, and allow, instead, for individualized creative expression by African American youth.

Many scholars have attached themselves to various concerns, recognizing the problematic real-life scenarios that teachers face. This, in turn, creates an expansion of what CRP was originally intended for. One such expansion addresses the difficulties teachers face in highly diverse classrooms when implementing CRP (Milner, 2011). Another scholar questions how CRP functions in relation to the race and ethnicity of immigrant children of similar skin tone but different cultural backgrounds (Allen, Jackson, & Knight, 2012). In other words, the complexities of CRP have emerged, both in relation to its concept and its implementation.

To further complicate the matter, some scholars are identifying that diverse cultures of Asian students are often considered as coming from a mono-cultural background, which this robs them of any sense of autonomy, difference, or uniqueness (Goodwin, 2010). Scholars have also identified complexities of CRP in relation to Latino, Puerto Rican, and Native American students. These expansions can lead to an argument that CRP might not be suitable for all classrooms. However, Ladson-Billings' original theoretical framework was developed specifically in consideration of pedagogical practices that affect African American student learning and engagement.

Racialized Identity and Performative Identity

I have found a quote by Na ‘ilah Suad Nasir (2011b) that reinforces my theoretical and philosophical underpinnings on racial identity:

> Race is a particularly challenging aspect of identity to study because it is lived and enacted subtly on multiple levels of experience. One challenge in studying race (particularly in relation to individuals) is the trouble that comes with assuming that members of racial groups are homogenous—in other words, essentializing. When we essentialize, we oversimplify the construct of race and fail to address the nuance and complexity that are inherent in the multiple ways we live race (Davidson, 1996; Lewis, 2003; Pollock, 2005; Skinner and Schafer, 2009). One resolution to this problem may be to understand that the racial boxes we use for the purposes of categorization are not deterministic; rather, they are rough ways of indexing the cultural practices and experiences of people in this highly racialized society. (p. 4)

African American experience is not homogeneous, yet a racialized society causes categorizations of cultural practices and experiences. For this reason, I often refer to the term racialized identities rather than racial identities. This is supported by Nasir (2011b) who states, “In my view, the term ‘racialized identities’ signals my underlying assumption about the fluidity and social construction of racial boundaries” (p. 4). This aligns with my own assumption that racial identity is a fluid, socially constructed category that is forever changing, depending on time, location, space, gender, and the like. I do not look at racialized identity as a scientific categorization, but as a sociological construct, and will discuss this in more detail later.

Performance Identity (PI) offers a framework for observing how students perform their identities—how they are doing, saying, and being creative beings through the arts, specifically as African American youth. This can be represented through speech, clothing, lyrical production, creative production, and language, to name just a few. Still, by claiming—or experimenting with—various race, gender, sexual, musical, and artistic

identities in association with clothing, speech, lyrical production, and the like, students can perform their chosen identity at any given time. A performance, or a production—from written word, language, acting, and the like—can replicate an identity that a creator has assumed for the moment. Like racialized identities, performative identities are therefore flexible, molding, constructing, and transforming. There can be a fluid motion depending on location, placement, and time. For this reason, performative identities are observed through formal and informal settings, either on stage or through daily-lived expression.

In this research, I consider a few theories concerning performative identities, which I will mention here and expand on in Chapter II. The first theory concentrates on black expressiveness (Gay & Baber, 1985; hooks, 1999): the idea that people perform identities and express them through a "process of being" (Gay and Barber, 1985, p. xvii), through looks, dress, speech, music, and the arts. The "construction and expression" (hooks, 1992, p. 135) of self, particularly for African American students, involves a race contextualization. Expressing and performing identities can perhaps be based on the centrality of their own individualized experience (Mackinlay, 2010). While students are in the process of doing, saying, being, and becoming active artists, my inquiry into expression and performing will add a racialized context to this research.

However, acknowledging injustices that African Americans have historically been subjected to makes it imperative to understand that Black expressiveness is not a universal language for every African American student in the United States. Students' experiences differ, and for this reason, care is required so as not to over-generalize a definition of *Blackness*. Such differences can be experienced through gender, class, and

cultural upbringing; bell hooks (1992), for example, cautions against subscribing to "narrow representations of black masculinity" (p. 89), and stresses that not all Black males (or females) can be represented as living one common experience.

Identifying commonalities and differences in the ways that students choose to perform and express themselves, and why they participate in these organizations—as seen from *their* viewpoints—will help to inform music educators how to better serve our nation's children (Fasching-Varner, 2012).

Organization of Study

This study is organized into seven chapters. Chapter II is a comprehensive literature review that discusses the theoretical frameworks of Critical Race Theory (CRT), Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP), and Racialized Performative Identities, which begins with the historical underpinnings of CRT in education, and its relation to this particular study. I review Sampson and Wade (2011) and Ladson-Billings (1995a), and then discuss the research and literature that have identified exemplary programs specifically for African American students in relation to Culturally Relevant Pedagogy. This exploration merges into an extended section on CRP and the diverse philosophical debate surrounding it. Once again, I feature Banks (2001), Gay (2000), and Ladson-Billings (1997). Then I explore the idea of African American performative identities, with particular emphasis on readings that claim a unification of race expressiveness. But I expand this notion in a racialized era—the continued effects of historically biased policies, by emphasizing scholars such as Dimitriadis (2001), Hill-Collins (2006), and Womack (2010).

Chapter III describes the methodology I chose, and provides an explanation for the use of qualitative research, clarifying what “portraiture style” writing is. It also includes methods for site identification, the size and sample of participant selection, data collection, and data analysis, and concludes with descriptive biographical information on participants.

Chapter IV provides the context of the research, giving descriptive details of the site and the various participants. A description of HSRA’s philosophies provides background information on how its organizational structure, implemented curricula, and teaching and learning support both students and educators.

Chapter V considers how the HSRA’s philosophy is illustrated through teaching and learning, what curricula are explored and implemented, and to what ends. This serves to clarify what the school considers “success” in teaching African American students. It also challenges traditional definitions of success used by educational systems to measure student learning.

In Chapter VI, I discuss Race and the complexities of racialized identification and affiliation in a color blind, post-racial, racist, bi-modal, historically racist society (Alexander, 2010, 2012; Bolgatz, 2005; Dyson, 1996, 1997; hooks, 2003). I also explore how performative identities are inter-related with students’ productions and creative art forms, discuss the perspective of African American youths on narratives about racialized experience of racism, identify judicial inequities in experience—e.g., Trayvon Martin and police harassment. Dichotomies emerge as students wrestle with living in a racialized society without becoming racist themselves, yet still yielding lyrical expressiveness

through experience, not necessarily racially bound. Race, experience, and culture become intertwined.

In Chapter VII, I discuss the implications for general education policy as well as for music education. I challenge the future of extant music education and give reason to address the intersections between education, the arts, and racialized experience. More specifically, I give reason for broadening music education opportunities for students who are otherwise disengaged in their educational process and have struggled with economic hardships, the justice system, and previous negative education experiences. In addition, I suggest research possibilities to consider in the future.

Research Method

Research methods include formal and informal observations, student and teacher interviews, a focus group, collection of artifacts, and the attendance of performances. Observations account for a large portion of the data collection. My initial observations were primarily informal, where interaction with faculty and students were unscripted. This was intended to develop relationships, and ultimately to identify possible interviewees. As relationships developed, my observations merged from participant observation to little interaction with participants in order to gain insight into the context of the human interactions and experiences I observed. As Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997) suggests, “Context becomes the framework, the reference point. . . . We have no idea how to decipher or decode an action, a gesture, a conversation . . . unless we see it embedded in context” (p. 41). Observing HSRA for 3½ weeks gave me sufficient time to acquire a deep understanding of the people, conversations, actions, and context.

Observing actions, gestures, conversations, and performances afforded opportunity for descriptions to build—finalizing in portraiture-style writing (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoff-Davis, 1988).

I interviewed both students and teachers/mentors. Interviews included ten students and five staff members. Each interview lasted from anywhere from one to two hours. One focus-group session was conducted in a semi-structured format. In Chapter III, I describe in greater detail the detailed research and interview questions.

Chapter II

LITERATURE REVIEW

The institutionalized music education of African American students differs greatly from the artistic opportunities many of them seek to engage. Locating artistic places in which African American students voluntarily choose to participate raises the question: *What is attracting students to these artistic organizations*? Why do students find a particular environment more valuable than another? I want to know where students are becoming, as Ernest Morrell (2010) stated, "independent, free-thinking, open-minded intellectuals who can come together to collect, process, and produce information that will help to solve the most challenging problems of our time" (p. 149). I also question whether the students even find it engaging to become independent, free-thinking individuals. If they do, does music education, which is often performance-based with musical literacy as a standard norm, deny engaging opportunities for students—especially students who seek to explore and express individuality?

There are clear inter-connections between students' individualized creativity, the arts programs that offer a space in which students can create, and the students' own socio-political positioning in life. Each category is equally important and relate to the chosen theoretical frameworks represented in this research. To explore the questions posed above, I first examined Critical Race Theory because I inquired into what policies in affect that reinforce educational disengagement, and what HSRA is implementing to

combat inequitable and disengaging educational experiences for African American youth. Second, I examined the experiences of African American youth in their artistic education, which is based on the belief that all African American students can share as producers of knowledge and become fully involved through creative engaging curricula, high academic standards, and socio-conscious criticality. Thus, Culturally Relevant Pedagogy was the second framework of this study. Third, I examined how students express and explore their identities as merging artistic producers. Here, then, performative identities became the third framework of this study. The following sections specifically discuss these three theoretical frameworks: Critical Race Theory, Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, and Performative Identities.

Critical Race Theory

Critical race theory (CRT) in education was originally designed to address race as the key component of an inequitable educational experience, particularly looking at law and implemented policies directly affecting children of color. Having discussed this briefly in Chapter I, I reiterate that CRT in education originated from Critical Legal Studies (CLS) emerging in the 1970s. Legalists, political activists and scholars initiated CLS in their effort to identify the need to analyze society's laws in a racial context. Their claim that racially biased laws dictated the legal system propelled Critical Legal Scholars to organize in the hope of creating greater impact and awareness of legal injustice based on race. This movement of legal scholars eventually filtered into a broader context of analyzing race as a key factor in other fields, thus becoming Critical Race Theory.

Critical Race Theory in Education

The United States, like many other countries, has a blemished history in which historically, certain members of society have been disempowered. In relation to historical inequalities in a democratic society, Campbell (2010) stated, “We in the United States have created one of the most free and democratic societies in human history, but at great cost to Native Americans, African slaves, and many immigrant workers” (p. 11). Similarly, the classification of any student who is not given opportunities or treated in a way to ensure that student’s success is an example of an underserved student. Historically, Hawaiian Americans, Native Americans, Mexican Americans, and African Americans have been the most underserved (Banks, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 1995a).

Critical Race Theory (CRT) emerged from various scholarly research in education and other fields as recently as the mid-1990s. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) influenced CRT in education by claiming that the educational system creates predictable outcomes black and brown children, thus identifying that the system often creates inequitable access and resources and contributes to the academic achievement gap of students of color. Sampson and Wade (2011) concur:

> Critical race theorists broaden the tenets of CRT by insisting that it address the origin of racism as a deeply rooted component of American life, which is ingrained through historical and ideological consciousness; and is particularly prevalent in educational systems (Bell, 1988; Delgado, 2002; Harris, 1983; Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995; Matsuda, 1987; Williams, 1987). Thus, these scholars have inserted issues of race into the power and privilege components of educational systems due to the need for a richer discussion about how issues of race and oppression infiltrate the educational setting. (p. 282)

This belief is shared by critical race theorists in education who claim that racial affiliation affects one’s educational experience and is historically enacted based upon “power and privilege.” CRT believes the historicity of racism is deeply engrained in the

educational system, as affirmed by a key writing frequently cited in the CRT framework by Solorzano and Yosso (2001). These authors compartmentalize CRT in education into five categories:

> 1) The centrality and intersectionality of race and racism: The notion that race intersects with gender and class and can be associated through large scale and smaller scale analysis.
>
> 2) The challenge to dominate ideology: The belief that CRT challenges the historical and current legacies of the dominant social and cultural classes including the dominant discourse whiteness as property.
>
> 3) The commitment to social justice: The belief that social justice is a key component within the CRT framework and encourages liberatory and transformative responses to various forms of oppression.
>
> 4) The centrality of experiential knowledge: Believing that education can draw upon, expanded and created through pedagogical techniques and educator's beliefs to incorporate and build on students lived experiences and funds of knowledge.
>
> 5) The interdisciplinary perspective: CRT challenges the traditional forms of pedagogy and learning to expand and include analysis of race and racism in historical and current interdisciplinary methods. (pp. 2-3)

These five categories are based on race, race relations, and the intersections between political powers. In support of the third tenet, Freire (1970) upheld a similar theory considering various power struggles in the educational system. Specifically, with regard to empowering students in a quest for humanitarian and equitable educational experiences, Freire stated, "in the pedagogy of the oppressed, a pedagogy must be forged *with* not *for*, the oppressed (whether individuals or peoples) in the incessant struggle to regain their humanity" (p. 48). Thus, he reinforced the commitment of the third tenet to working with students in a "liberatory and transformative response."

The second tenet stated by Solorzano and Yosso (2001) addresses the notion that a dominant social hierarchal class in America has the power to embrace *the whiteness as*

property paradigm. This idea that Whites in the United States carry out and enforce property allegations is set in a long historically-rooted context encompassing legal slavery, the Jim Crow laws, American Apartheid, and segregation. The ramifications of these historic acts blend into and affect our educational system, as DeCuir and Dixson (2004) observed in discussing the earlier work of Harris (1995), who established whiteness as a form of property on three levels: "The right of possession, the right to use, and the right to disposition" (p. 28). This idea correlates with scholars who have argued that the American educational system is often set up to dictate who has equal access to *what* we teach and *how* we teach. It dictates who has the right to use education and who has the right to the disposal of information. By denying students the right to possess an education or utilize it as a source of financial gain, the whiteness as property paradigm dominates, thereby eliminating *others* assess to freedom.

Social Justice

In line with the social justice tenet and the whiteness as property paradigm, Tillman (2002) stated, "leadership for social justice investigates and poses solutions for issues that generate and reproduce societal inequities" (p. 42). This places responsibility on leadership to encourage a social justice-empowered praxis. Yet, Feldman and Tyson (2007) believed that leadership cannot walk blindly in implementing a social justice framework, but needs to work within an "explicit theoretical framework for social justice in order to inform 'who' it is taught, 'what' is taught, and 'how' it is taught to future school leaders" (p. 2). This explicit framework can guide practitioners in their embraced philosophical teaching agendas and guide teaching practices on a daily basis. Therefore, social justice leadership identifies and supports the building of a social justice practice:

> The pursuit of democratic ideals when their relationship-building activities create bridges for marginalized families and their children. It supports educational leaders seeking strategies for developing and implementing antiracist curricula, for preventing homophobic and sexist bullying. Supports their efforts to conceptualize and articulate models of leadership that incorporate democratic community engagement, spirituality and emotion, and a caring connection. (Marshall & Oliva, 2010, p. 10)

Various scholars have identified the different sects of a social justice theoretical framework that correlate to the critical race theoretical framework adapted by Solorzano and Yosso (2001). Clear definitions of a social justice framework, according to Marshall and Oliva (2010), include:

> * Anti-bias Education: a developmental approach to social justice rooted in racial identity development theory, and progressive, grassroots practices of education as activism for social change.
>
> * Critical Pedagogy: an empowerment approach to social justice concerned first with emancipatory education of the oppressed through critically questioning the contradiction in the immediate reality of schooling.
>
> * Multicultural Education: an intellectual approach to social justice rooted in expanding the production and dissemination of knowledge to include all groups in society.
>
> * Whiteness Studies: a de-centering/deconstructing whiteness approach to social justice rooted in the understanding of race as a social construction that produces the system of advantage based on race and locates racism as a white problem to be solved by whites in education. (p. 42)

These different social justice theories share common goals with critical race theory regarding anti-bias education and a commitment to social justice. They embrace the notion of deconstructing and identifying whiteness as property similarities while acknowledging that race and racism exist. They encourage intellectual critical thinking and inquisitive dissemination of knowledge, yet acknowledge a notable difference that critical race theory has the attachment of legal studies and resists the notion of historical

and contemporary racial biases within the educational system, targeted specifically for children of color.

Considering Solorzano and Yosso's (2001) idea that economic inequalities and opportunities are one dimension of the multi-faceted construction of power and privilege, specifically for students of color, it is appropriate to tie this back to antidemocratic reforms manifested through the lenses of poverty, funding inadequacies, testing demands, accountability, and privatization in the educational system. Several scholars (Anyon, 2006; Apple, 2006; Ayers, 2006; Banks, 2006; Morrell, 2010) agree that inequities in education take in many forms, including disparities in class allocation, testing and accountability scores, educational financial distributions, course offerings and/or student placement in courses, and social interactions between authority figures and students. Similarly, Ayres (2006), agreeing with Ladson-Billings and Tate (2006), identified that inequalities are abundant in resource allocation, facility equity, available opportunities, and even "relevant curriculum" and "standardized testing" (p. 87).

Considering high-stakes and achievement gap inequities and how they relate to critical race theory, Lipman (2006) identified that "high-stakes accountability, standardization, privatization, and militarization of schools contribute" (p. 111) to the inequity discourse of education. In an effort to effect change, Boober-Jennings (2005) conducted a research project utilizing participant observation, interviews, document analysis, and informal interactions in an elementary school in Texas, after which procedures, practices, and policies were modified to achieve a Texas status of "recognized" rating. As encouraging as this may look on statistical reports, however, this recognized ranking came at the cost of particular students at the school, because students

were categorized into three groups: “safe cases, suitable cases for treatment, and hopeless cases” (pp. 232-233). Each group received instruction according to its level, yet the hopeless cases were quickly identified as special education, thus moving them away from the accountability statistical data. These students who were moved into special education were all students of color.

Allen (2009) identified that many researchers have been quick to identify statistical disparities in the racially divided achievement gap, as the National Center for Education Statistics (1996, 1998, 2000) and the U.S. Department of Education (2004, 2007) attest, yet successes are often ignored. However, considering that any one of the aforementioned topics do not stand alone but in fact they are intertwined, some scholars argue, “inequitable test score outcomes are not solely based on the inadequacies of the students or families or communities, but often result from systemic organization practices and policies” (Marshall & Oliva, 2010, p. 7).

This idea has been documented by a number of scholars (Kozol, 1991; Phillips-Swanson, & Beale-Spencer, 1991), each of whom agree that systemic inadequacies and unequal distribution create many of the inequalities that, ironically, the system is reversely blaming on the afflicted. By contrast, some of these same scholars find hope in the belief that inequities in education can possibly be rectified by unrelenting systemic and research-based intervention (Phillips-Swanson & Beale-Spencer, 1991). In considering systemic equal opportunity which affects educational policies, Dyson (2007) agreed: “We can’t talk about schooling kids, and having them in the right frame of mind to go out into the world, if they don’t have any economic resources to sustain them once they get out there, or more than that, after they go home” (p. 18). Implementing

interventions that attend to systemic economic inequalities is essential, according to Dyson. Gant (2010) likewise argued that school reform cannot take place until people "see the values and attitudes about power, privilege, and knowledge that keep existing structures, regulations, and authority relationships in place in educational systems" (p. 755).

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

The original culturally relevant pedagogical key concepts posed by Ladson-Billings (1995a) stemmed from the recognition of a lack of discussion about effective teaching practices and learning with African American students. As she (1997) stated:

> Some may ask, why focus on African American students? The telling statistics on the life chances of African Americans suggest that whenever we can improve the schooling experiences for African American students, we have an opportunity to reverse their life chances. A disturbing percentage of African American males are involved with the criminal justice system (Miller, 1997). . . . African American students are 2 to 5 times more likely to be suspended (and at a younger age) the total number of African American inmates (includes all ages) exceeds the total African American male college population, which is primarily between the ages 18 and 25. The dropout rate of urban, inner-city African American youth is 36% and rising (Whitaker, 1988). And although graduation from high school is no guarantee of success in life, a life without a high school diploma is almost certain to be unsuccessful-economically and socially. (pp. 697-698)

Identifying a desire to create opportunity for African American students, Ladson-Billings (1995a) created a research project exploring "exemplary teachers of African American students" (p. 477). Through this research of exemplary teaching, she identified three main components classifying what culturally relevant pedagogy entails: insuring academic achievement, supporting sociopolitical consciousness, and encouraging the use of cultural competence (p. 469). As Ladson-Billings stated:

> A next step for positioning effective pedagogical practice is a theoretical model that not only addresses [African American] student achievement but also helps students to accept and affirm their cultural identity while developing critical perspectives that challenge inequities that school (and other institutions) perpetuate. (p. 469)

This overarching framework acknowledged that Ladson-Billings was particularly interested in African American students through three main tenets of CRP. This is not to say that this framework has not been expanded to include a variety of races, ethnicities, cultures and so on (which will be discussed later in this chapter). However, Ladson-Billings did not enter her initial research project attempting to find exemplary teachers in diverse settings or, for example, exemplary teachers of Hispanic students. Her main focus began in search of the educational experience of African Americans.

Ladson-Billings (2001) considered how "in a society that places such priority on racial identity, we are naïve if we attempt to ignore race" (p. 97). Identity development scholars have argued that we all attach to or embody some form of identity classification, either through the lens of others or understood as our own compartmentalized identity concerning race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, as primary frameworks of our existence. Thus, we bring our identities into our classroom experience and to whatever role we play within our educational community, and they cannot be separated.

Complementing this main theme specifically on race, Ladson-Billings acknowledged that students of color are positioned in the social, political, racial and cultural paradigms of the U.S. political system, which affects their educational experience. Both Ladson-Billings (1995a) and Gay (2010) expressed concerns for people who have long historical roots of inequity in social and educational opportunities, and have incorporated into the discussion ways to illuminate instruction congruent with the

experiences of students who have been historically marginalized within the U.S. system. As Gay (2010) stated, “The highest quality educational programs and practices can never be accomplished if some ethnic groups and their contributions to the development of U.S. history, life, and culture are ignored or demeaned” (p. 21). Thus, one may argue that our political, social, and educational system reflects our cultural beliefs. This leads me to another main tenet of culturally relevant pedagogy, the idea that many educators believe that students of color lack multiple qualities to achieve. This is similar to the deficit model so readily discussed within the CRP framework (Ware, 2006), that educators will never fully encourage African American youth to engage, learn, and grow intellectually if they believe they cannot. Thus, these youth are denied their fullest potential.

Achievement

Academic achievement is a primary focus for educators who fully embrace CRP. Ware (2006) identified the need for “Warm Demanders” who support and expect African American student achievement (p. 427). The concern over low test scores by African American students have led many scholars to examine more closely the idea that a culturally relevant curriculum may perhaps be an avenue of increasing academic achievement and school participation (Banks, 2001; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2000, 2006). Lowenstein (2009) believes that teachers must maintain a philosophy that “all students can succeed” (p. 176). For this reason, many scholars who practice culturally relevant pedagogy agree that African American children should be held to high standards of academic achievement because they *can* achieve (Ladson-Billings, 2001; Liston & Zeichner, 1996; Nieto, 1999). These beliefs are critical for fostering academic excellence and cultural integrity. Similarly, McAnally (2006, cited in Frierson-Campbell, 2006a)

agreed when she stated, “We must strongly believe that every child in our classroom can and should achieve success . . . our first and perhaps most important task is to help students discover that an innate desire to learn is already present within them” (p. 100).

Gay’s (2010) assumptions are that students of color can achieve. Like Ladson-Billings, Gay popularized an idea similar to Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, known as Culturally Responsive Pedagogy. Both share many similarities, which I will discuss later, but one common belief is that “culturally responsive teachers have unequivocal faith in the human dignity and intellectual capabilities of their students” (p. 45). This could be read as a general statement for the context of *all* students. However, given the Culturally Responsive teaching context, the “capabilities of their students” refers to an ethnic and racially diverse student body, students who have been historically excluded and oppressed from educational equality. As both Gay and Ladson-Billings recognized, African American students can achieve. Gay (2010) in particular emphasized, “From can’t to can” (p. 23).

This belief system requires educators to view African American students as beings and not as objects in which they insert knowledge. This, in turn, requires relationships which can develop in cohesive learning environments. Many scholars (Gant, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995a) share educational philosophies that believe teachers of non-African American descent who are teaching African American students must develop relationships with them. For effective teaching practice, they need to respect these students, know the worlds in which they reside, and revamp the curriculum to suit the student body. Similarly Allen (2009) stated:

> Effective teachers must be able to create social climates in their classrooms that promote development and learning; they must be able to work as a

> collaborative unit with parents, support staff, their colleagues and others in the community to create these climates and systems of achievement. This is a core philosophy of school reform in regards to creating a culturally relevant and proficient school. (p. 41)

This idea of teaching and creating social climates of inclusivity to eradicate most forms of hierarchal learning is in alignment with Jones' (2001) statement:

> In contrast to this educational model which encourages passivity and conformity, the liberatory model, from the outset, mandates that the teacher-student dichotomization be eradicated so that both are simultaneously teaching and taught. . . . The teacher must seek to transform himself from an intellectual taskmaster into a partner of the students. (p. 8)

All of these scholars believe that relationships are fairly non-discriminatory in matters of learning; both participants are engaged in learning and teaching.

Not only is creating a learning environment of reciprocity thought to be important in CRP, but scholars (Benedict, 2006; Garrison-Wade & Lewis, 2006) also advocate for educators to consider correlations between race, culture, values, and collective responsibility as a common practice in teaching. For example, Garrison-Wade and Lewis (2006) stated, "Take the time to learn about your students' backgrounds and interests. This will help you develop a connection with them that may create an environment conducive to learning" (p. 157). This is a common theme when considering how a teacher might teach other people's children, which is also the name of the book by Delpit (1995). The theme also correlates to *how* and *what* teachers might implement in their curricula.

Curriculum

According to Ladson-Billings' (1995a) original framework, curriculum plays a large role in supporting the three main tenets of CRP: insuring academic achievement, supporting sociopolitical consciousness, and encouraging the use of cultural competence

(p. 469). One avenue for implementing CRP, as various educators and researchers advocate, is a culturally competent curriculum specifically for African American students (Collins, 1991; Dyson, 2007; Gant, 2005; Gustafson, 2008; Hill, 2005; hooks, 2008). These scholars agreed that democratic classroom philosophies ideally establish a personal sense of ownership and power in an individual, however, established curricula in the majority of subjects omit any form of African American historical empowerment and agency. Curricula that omit African American contributions and participation in a global society delete African Americans not only from literature, but also from the psyche of the African American people (Baldwin, 1963; Du Bois, 1903; Woodson, 1933). Conflict emerges when one considers the lack of existing curricula depicting African American youth as historically participatory citizens, while simultaneously incorporating a teaching practice that perhaps encourages students to be participatory citizens both in the classroom environment and society at large. Thus, a disconnect emerges as students are inundated with Eurocentric ideals yet are at times encouraged to participate in such activity, with little sense of relatable similarity that is attainable. Gant (2010) referred back to Ladson-Billings (1994) when she summarized that students use their life situations, culture, and family experiences to make connections in the classroom and world. She added, “Culturally relevant teaching uses students’ culture in order to maintain its cultural reference and to transcend the negative effects of the dominant culture. Negative effects are brought about by not seeing one’s history, culture, or background represented, and or distorted in the textbook or curriculum” (p. 41).

Based on Gay’s (2010) view, removing curriculum mandates that divorce “culture, ethnicity and personal experience” (p. 13) from the educational processes of

students of color will facilitate the commitment to help students be the best they can be. Woodson (1933) also considered it important to develop one of the first culturally relevant African American curricula that reflected the history, culture, and contributions so often omitted from textbooks. This then would ultimately encourage cultural democracy for African American citizens (Woodson, 1933, 1977). This curriculum, although not labeled CRP, was the first of its kind.

Music Curriculum

In moving specifically to music education, the first key researcher to consider is Deborah Bradley (2006), who identified that race matters in music education. While she has extensively explored ideas of race and music education, the specific purpose of her 2006 paper on race, racism, and multiculturalism was an "attempt to 'decolonize' our understandings of multiculturalism in music. I will first consider the ways race is embed as codded language in discourse, and the ways our use of coded language hinders our ability to talk about race directly" (pp. 2-3). Bradley found that old habits of colonialized, raced language reinforced racism. Even though the hope of multiculturalism in music is to unite and reinforce an appreciation of new-found worlds, old-coded language reinforces stereotypes. Thus, race is particularly relevant in music education.

As Hinkley (2001) stated, "Music programs of the future will continue to be rooted in convention because of the music's role as a purveyor of traditions, but changing demographics and technological advancements will influence the way that music is experienced in life and in schools" (p. 67). The standard of whiteness in music curriculum was similarly researched as a concept of mistrust in an African American adolescent female population. Regarding gender and race, Killian (1990) concluded that

African American students preferred listening to and imitating African American musical models as compared to White musical models. Additionally, African American females had a more preferred model of the same race and gender. Thus, when African American students are denied opportunities to create and perform within musical models familiar to them and to their liking, enrollment may decline. Likewise, Johnson-Chin's (1997) mixed method research led to the creation of the Cultural Mistrust Inventory (CMI), measuring the social construct of mistrust. Utilizing the CMI and recorded music examples, Johnson-Chin identified that African American adolescent females had a greater self-identification with African American vocalists than with White vocalists. The research additionally identified that African American female vocalists inhabited "traditionally" African American vocal styles such as glissandos, raspyness, and glides as their preferred vocalized projections (p. 644). This research signifies that African American role models and culturally relevant curriculum collaboratively work together to influence music educational practice. Collectively, these research studies generally identified that African American students appreciate and feel an established identity to an African American-focused music curriculum. Yet, much effort has gone into maintaining music curricula "as they are currently structured" (Gustafson, 2008, p. 292).

In considering a culturally relevant music curriculum for African American students, Gustafson (2008) grappled with possible reasons for the "near-total absence (of African American students) in secondary school music programs" (p. 268). He questioned why there is such a decline in African American participation in music programs as the students progress. Gustafson's inquiry reflected on the "pedagogical traditions in music curriculum" (p. 268) and sought to identify music curricula that may

"alienate particular groups of students" (p. 268). His two-year research project revealed that because of the Whiteness of the standard music curriculum, students who do not identify themselves with this Whiteness learning style or choose to participate in a prescribed manner tend to "eventually withdrawal" from their music program (p. 291). Thus, African American enrollment diminishes as age increases.

While not speaking directly to Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, Allsup (1997) provided insights for teacher education when he describes how his personal musical education worked both for and against his pedagogy in the South Bronx. He identified that the majority of teacher education programs do not prepare music education students to teach in city settings. For this reason, during his time at an all-boys school, Allsup stated:

> The experience I've gained has taught me that to keep a student involved in music, every teaching consideration must be student-focused. Teaching strategies must be designed not only around the learner's interest, but must also take into account the student's culture and values, along with the student's relationship to learning and self-discipline. (p. 34)

Although Allsup suggested utilizing students' culture as a tool for increased musical engagement, culturally relevant teaching does not necessarily use the word "student-focused," as Allsup did. However, he alluded to the idea that student-focused pedagogy and curriculum, according to a student's culture, manifests itself within a culturally relevant framework.

A more recent analysis of culturally relevant curricula has suggested that students are eager to learn with such a curriculum (Chan, 2007; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2000; Ware, 2006). This premise was supported by Sampson and Garrison-Wade (2010, 2011) who examined whether or not African American students preferred culturally

relevant or non-culturally relevant lessons and whether culturally relevant curriculum specifically has an effect on the achievement of African American students. The findings indicated that African Americans indeed felt engaged and interested in a culturally relevant curriculum that increased their participation effort on a particular assignment.

Using a mixed methods approach to determine the preferences of culturally relevant and non-culturally relevant lessons for African American students, Sampson and Garrison-Wade utilized music lyrical analysis and discussed the use of the "N" word as a portion of the applied curriculum. Guided by two research questions, they sought to understand (a) whether or not culturally relevant or non-culturally relevant lessons were preferred by African American students, and (b) whether culturally relevant lessons related to the lives of African American students. The findings suggested that "Students have a keen interest in culturally relevant curriculum" (p. 291). Additionally, certain themes emerged that could be interchangeable with culturally relevant pedagogy and a more generalized teaching practicum. Theme one identified topics such as racially demeaning terminology can be enriching and stimulating because it promoted social-political consciousness through the relevance of their lived experiences. Theme two identified that lessons should be interesting and fun as they increased student participation and engagement. Theme three identified that teacher interaction, energy, sense of humor, and interest in the students' well-being were imperative in promoting student learning (p. 284). A fourth theme revealed that African American students felt more engaged and interested in the culturally relevant curriculum while still feeling like it may be awkward or irrelevant to the Hispanic and White students in the class (p. 286).

Their sense of feeling proud and interested conflicted with their social interactions within the group setting.

Hip Hop and Popular Culture

Hip Hop research has dominated the recent discourse of culturally relevant African American music educational experiences. While Hip Hop is not the only culturally relevant music that could be available to African American teenagers, it has become a prominent musical genre in popular culture, gaining world-wide attention and attracting youthful consumption. It has become a key source of inquiry in hopes of drawing students into a culturally relevant pedagogy (Dyson, 2007; Hill, 2005; Stovall, 2006b).

Although I will not discuss the origins of Hip Hop in this literature review, it is important to acknowledge that the music was created by people of Jamaican and African American descent (Akom, 2009; Dyson, 2007, 2009; Hill, 2005; Runnell-Hall, 2009). With this acknowledgement, it is appropriate to state that previous research has focused primarily on the implementation of Hip Hop in the general educational curriculum. The analysis and creation of Hip Hop lessons have been implemented primarily in English and History courses by various researchers and scholars such as Gustafson (2008), Hill (2005), Low (2006, 2010), and Wishart-Leard and Lashua (2006). Their various findings have established that Hip Hop pedagogy and rap poetry have a positive effect on African American students' appreciation for the curriculum.

Likewise, Hill (2005) in his dissertation primarily researched how knowledge, power, and identities are negotiated and renegotiated as Hip Hop culture became a part of the official curriculum in a *Hip Hop Literature Class.* This study utilized a critical

ethnographic approach utilizing Hip Hop music and text as the basic foundation for the course while inquiring into relational dynamics between students and teachers, interpretations of text within the students' own lives, and an analysis of classroom power dynamics. The creation of the *Hip Hop Literature Class* engaged otherwise "struggling" students in active participation, literacy, and analysis of their own inquiry into the identity and power they may or may not have in life (p. 34).

Educators have argued that considering students' lived experiences is an essential part of the larger goal of critical pedagogy to eliminate distinctions between high or elite culture and to make the official curriculum more responsive to students' everyday lives (Giroux & Simon, 1989). It has also been debated that the inclusion of popular culture into a music curriculum can perhaps encourage a democratic philosophy within the classroom because, as Hill (2005) stated, "it encourages retention of knowledge of personal histories, experiences and values of students" (p. 72). Giroux (1995) agreed with this idea, reiterating that the histories, experiences, and values of students can reflect and be byproducts of popular culture, can be utilized in the classroom. This similarly reinforces Dimitriadis' (2002) research on performing identities, which specifically inquired into how "contemporary youth" (p. xi) use the popular world's text to negotiate a space for themselves within the greater context of their own worlds. Dimitriadis identified that education has largely ignored these outside world influences in teaching, pedagogy, and curriculum. For example, he found that student-led inquiry into the singer Tupac, and their appreciation of the revolutionary Black Political movement such as the Black Panthers, negotiated a space for themselves through media arts.

This type of criticality in education, however, is often eliminated from mainstream educational practice. This reality was reinforced by a two-year qualitative research project conducted by Low (2009), who investigated the discrepancies between students' desires versus the teachers'/administrators' reluctance to incorporate Hip Hop into the curriculum. Low identified conflict, misunderstandings, and tension between the implementation of a "Black popular culture" curriculum (p. 195)—a tension that had to be re-defined, renegotiated, and advocated for by the students who desired this particular curriculum. Ultimately, Low found that teachers and administrators are in fact reluctant to incorporate Hip Hop into the curriculum. However, this research finds the teacher who implemented it, students simultaneously developed a "social responsibility in representation of the music" (p. 215). Likewise, Ayers (2006) identified the reluctance of a principal in Chicago who was approached to implement a rap-based literacy curriculum. Feeling pressure to increase test scores, the principal stated, "There is no research that links studying rap with improved test scores"—to which the researcher replied, "What research links the study of Shakespeare to higher scores?" (as cited in Ladson-Billlings, & Tate, 2006, p. 90). This statement signified the idea that existing implemented curriculum and a standard of Whiteness remained the standard of excellence.

Expansion of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Culturally relevant pedagogy research is inundated with scholars who have attached themselves to various emerging expansions and addenda, recognizing problematic real-life scenarios that teachers face during their teaching career. This reality addresses extremely diverse classroom settings and how CRP can be addressed within

them. The original concept of CRP directed towards an African American student body has been expanded and directed towards a larger sphere of immigrant children from West Africa (Allen, Jackson, & Knight, 2012) and Asia (Goodwin, 2010). The list goes on concerning Latino, Puerto Rican, Native American, and other cultural investigations. However, the term "culture" has actually challenged CRP because it may not fit students' specific needs in a diverse setting. As Milner (2011) identified, "People sometimes misuse the term culture by collapsing all individuals in a particular race together" (p. 71), because culture is often thought of in linguistic, historic, racial, ethnic, sexual, artistic, and geographic terms.

Similarly, educators often describe students according to race or other socially constructed categorizations. As Benson (2003) identified, "Students do not arrive as blank slates on the front door of classrooms. They come to school as members of different cultures" (p. 16). Different cultures could be identified as sexual orientation, class, race, ethnicity, and the like: the identification is not based solely on race. As a result, a conflict emerges with Ladson-Billings' original CRP framework and why many scholars, including Ladson-Billings, have expanded the CRP framework to include other cultures as well. Identifying that even all African American students do not own the same experience, I argue that Ladson-Billings remains steadfast in her original construct that inquires into and improves the educational experiences of African Americans.

By incorporating race, ethnicity, and culture into the composition of culturally relevant or responsive teaching, Gay (2010) and Ladson-Billings (1995a) agreed that the social, political, racial, and cultural paradigms in which students of color are positioned in the U.S. political system clearly affect their educational experience. Their research has

concerned itself with peoples who have long historical roots of inequity in social and educational opportunities and with how to illuminate instruction congruent with students who have been historically marginalized in the U.S. system. Gay (2010) maintained her first assumption that "culture is at heart of all we do in the name of education…and refers to a dynamic system of social values, cognitive codes, behavioral standards, worldview, and beliefs used to give order and meaning to our own lives" (p. 9). Moreover, as she added, "The highest quality educational programs and practices can never be accomplished if some ethnic groups and their contributions to the development of U.S. history, life, and culture are ignored or demeaned" (p. 21). Thus, our political, social, and educational system reflects our cultural beliefs that students of color are traditionally segregated and/or marginalized in mainstream America. Gay (2010) acknowledged this concern over the lack of multiethnic examples woven into a culturally relevant pedagogy:

> The units of analysis in research, theory, and practice often are skewed more toward some ethnic groups than others. For example, more data are available on the need for and experience with culturally responsive teaching as it relates to African Americans than to other groups of color. (p. xxi)

Her desire is to inquire into various ethnic groups in future research to extend understanding to the existing culturally responsive research.

To summarize, scholars have considered the possibilities of increasing African American (or ethnically diverse) academic achievement through pedagogical practices and curricula that engage their interest and affirm cultural competence. However, they simultaneously encourage critical analysis that challenges worlds of inequality in the lived experiences of these groups. The heart of academic achievement through pedagogical methods includes the practice of cultural competence and critical awareness.

Such practice is of utmost importance to effect positive change in the educational lives of all students of color.

Identities

Identity is never fixed; we are always becoming. (Greene, 2011)

To introduce identity theory, I open with this quote by Maxine Greene that reinforces the idea that although much research has been conducted on topics of identity, there is no denying that matters of identity are malleable and flexible. This flexibility causes an African American racial identity theory to be expansive. For this reason, it is necessary for me to claim that I do not focus on identity as categorized by physical traits, science, or IQ scholarship—categories that have a long history of "criminalizing the victim with a stamp of biological inferiority, in short, using biology as an accomplice to scientific racism" (Allen 2001, p. 102). Instead, I focus on race and identity in terms of sociocultural categorizations.

As Gay (1987) stated, "Ethnic identity development is a complex, multifaceted, and dynamic process" (p. 35). Even though identity theory is complex and multifaceted, scholars have narrowed it down to three frameworks: (a) ego identity, (b) racial identity, and (c) ethnic identity (DeCarlo, 2005, p. 32). Each one of these then expands into areas such as gender identities (Abramo, 2009), or social and cognitive aspects of identity development (DeCarlo, 2005, p. 32), and musical identities (Demitriadis, 2001), to name a few.

Although identity is malleable (Gay, 1987; Greene, 2011) and changes according to sexuality, gender, and other self-identifications, Nasir (2011b) presents research focused on African American youth identity. She states:

> Race is particular challenging aspect of identity to study because it is lived and enacted subtly on multiple levels of experience. One challenge in studying race (particularly in relation to individuals) is the thought that comes with assuming that members of racial groups are homogenous—in other words, essentializing. When we essentialize, we oversimplify the construct of race and fail to address the nuance and complexity that are inherent in the multiple ways we live race (Davidson, 1996; Lewis, 2003, Pollock, 2005; Skinner and Schafer, 2009). One resolution to this problem may be to understand that the racial boxes we use for the purposes of categorization are not deterministic, rather, they are rough ways of indexing the cultural practices and experiences of people in this highly racialized society. (p. 4)

A lived experience is fluid and not homogenous. Codifying race is oversimplifying a lived racial experience. Racial boxes according to Nasir can be criticized due to the highly racialized society. Simplified, the term racialized society is referred to by scholars as the historically created socio-political construction of race (Lipsitz, 2013; Nasir, 2011b; Omi & Winant, 1999). Lipsitz (2013) claimed that the construction of race not only looks through culture, but:

> through systemic efforts from colonial times to the present to create economic advantages through a possessive investment in whiteness for European Americans. Studies of culture too far removed from studies of social structure leave us with inadequate explanations for understanding racism and inadequate remedies for combating it. (p. 78)

Lipsitz believed history has affected current social structures that promote racism. West (1993a) believes that race *does* matter in everyday life for everyday people. But as Omi and Winant (1999) stated, conceptions and meanings of race can focus on “the continuing significance and changing meaning of race” (p. 3). Race matters and the meaning of “race” has evolved, changed, and remains changing. What it meant to be Black in

American society before the Civil War clearly differs from what it means to be Black today, post Trayvon Martin murder.

Racial experience is also about the historically implemented and social categorizations created within the U.S. system that affects one's experience; for example: An African American student grows up in Florida where the legal and lethal threat of *the right to keep and bear arms* differs from undocumented lynchings post-slavery, yet remains historically socially constructed and implemented. Spears (1999) and many other social theorists agree that race is socially constructed, arguably to maintain power and privilege. As Spears noted, "Race is a sociocultural category, and more specifically it is ideological in the critical sense that . . . [it] is typically used in reference to power elites, who use ideology to rationalize their power and exploitation of other groups" (p. 19). Omni and Winant (1993) warn again ignoring "that the salience of a social construct can develop over half a millennium or more of diffusion . . . as a fundamental principle of social organization and identity formation" (Omi & Winant, 1993, as cited in McCarthy & Crichlow, 1993, p. 5). They argue that race and racial experience in everyday life is "indissoluble" (p. 5) and affects one's own identity: "Our society is so thoroughly racialized that to be without racial identity is to be in danger of having no identity. To be raceless is akin to being genderless" (p. 5).

Racialized identities continue to be malleable in with racial identity. Omi and Winant (1993) discussed three main points that relate to non-fixed racial identity. They claimed there are various aspects that affect one's own experience with race which are "process-oriented and relational." Life paths, choices, and opportunities affect a racial experience, thereby being "relational" (Omi & Winant, 1993, as cited in McCarthy &

Crichlow, 1993, p. 6). Historically implemented racial and social categorizations change throughout time and place, forcing it to be "relational." Finally, racial identity cannot ignore the notion of *formation* and how a process is individual and collective, requiring interpretation and reinterpretation according to experience.

Regarding the difference between personal identity (self-esteem) and collective identity (group identity), Crocker and Luhtanen (1990) found that positive group identity produced positive self-esteem (Allen, 2001, p. 108). Yet later researchers found no apparent relation between the two. For example, Cross (1991), who did an in-depth analysis of 45 empirical studies between 1939 through 1987, tried to understand relations between personal identity (race and self-esteem) and group identity. He reported that the majority of students revealed no relationship between the two constructs, but a substantial number did. Under closer analysis, he found that the identification of group memberships or affiliation had little significance for self-esteem. Arguably, group identity that is affiliated with various social constructs (i.e., social class, culture, immigration status, spiritual affiliations) can reflect the "double consciousness or duality" of everyday life (Allen, 2001, p. 129).

According to West (1993a), "racial categories [which] are integrated into a racial hierarchy. . . . Race is and has been used to justify the exploitation of people of color as well as Whites" (p. 19). This suggests that the racial hierarchy, including the educated elites, is still faced with "[a] lack of power for blacks to present themselves to themselves and others as complex human beings, and thereby to contest the bombardment of negative, degrading stereotypes put forward by white supremacist ideologies" (West, 1993, as cited in McCarthy & Crichlow, 1993, p. 17). Thus, continued distress is

maintained with “invisibility and namelessness” (p. 17). A distinction between the educated and non-educated, combined with social constructs of racism, perpetuates marginalization of African American generations. Tatum (2005) echoed this idea, stating, “It is easy for many young black males to conclude that the world is indifferent to their existence” (p. 6). I am also reminded of Ralph Ellison’s excerpt in *Invisible Man*, “I was and yet I was unseen” (p. 507)—or unheard.

Performative Identities

Performing and creating cause one’s existence to be acknowledged. There is a correlation between creation, performance, and self—a performing identity. Researchers have argued that performative identities are created and re-enacted, perhaps due to (a) free choice, (b) an unconscious act, or (c) reenactments of their subconscious, everyday exposures, causing one to believe that their identities are “universal truths” (Abramo, 2009; Bourdieu, 1977). As a result, this can cause difficulty in confirming a single path to a conceptualization of a performative identity.

In regards to free choice, if a student freely chooses to “act” a certain way during a performance, assuming a different persona or character that may be remote from his or her real life, this is a performing identity. I argue that free choice acting *is* an identity that can embody a character for the time being. It affects a student’s experience simply because that student is experiencing an act of becoming something else—for the time being. It is free choice to embody a new or changing identity as desired. I think of examples of musicians who enter the stage and take on a whole new performing identity like Lady Gaga, Kiss, or Madonna, where heightened energy, elaborate wardrobes, and staging effects accentuate their free choice (Boyd, & George-Warren, 2013). Scholars

have identified characteristics of Black preacher performing identities as well, the rhythmic, tonal, and linguistic variations that take on a performative aspect of the sermon (Gay, 1997; Jones, 1963). Choice and acting co-exist with a performing identity.

In regards to subconscious acts, this free choice to act as one desires intersects with performance as a subconscious *act*. These are acts subconsciously based on everyday media exposure of role models, musical favorites, and the like. (Abramo, 2009; Demitiriadis, 2001). Abramo (2009) stated that performativity of a gendered identity is often situational and perhaps reiterated over time. People repetitively play out behaviors that reference the discourses of how they think men or women "should act" (p. 276) subconsciously. From this view, according to Abramo (2009), "one's gender is not a natural identity which dictates one's behavior, but the opposite: one's behaviors, repeated and through constant citation of conventions of gender, create a gendered identity" (p. 278). I view this through a racial lens as well. One's racial experience and expression are related to repeated conventions of race, through exposure to and accordance with lived experiences. It influences a performer, a performer's identity, and expression.

In regards to unconscious acts, Students may add their own personal presence or personality in a performance through the use of language, movement, and gesture, but draw from subconscious influences that affect performing identity. A combination of personal preference, and personality inter-relate (Demitriadis, 2001). Some believe this to be performing culture, thereby once again deflecting notions of race to culture (Omi & Winant, 1993, as cited in McCarthy & Crichlow, pp. xvi-xvii).

Black Expressiveness

Black expressiveness, according to Gay and Baber (1985) and hooks (1999), considers how African American students are encouraged in individual, social, and political agency through expressing themselves. For the present research, the main area of analysis centered in Black expressiveness considered students' representation of self and their individual social and political agency through speech and creative production. Mass media has influenced popular culture (Demitiriadis, 2001; Morrell, 2011), although Black representation has been analyzed through media representation, film, socially-biased news media, and White interpretations of blackness (as in the case of musicians who have taken on "blackness" in their representation) (Dyson, 1996, p. 21). Some musicians may genuinely and respectfully appreciate Black art forms and give credence to their creators; for example, Eminem and Macklemore, who have publically stated their performing influence is Black musicians specifically. Some like Miley Cyrus, Elvis Presley, and others may take on "blackness" to increase popularity and marketability, giving no credence or discussion to the replications of their musical influences. Little research has addressed this focus of attention. But more often, Black expressiveness is often talked about through a representation of literacies (language), music, and the arts.

As far as how language and literacies interconnect, Abrahams (1970) pointed out that Black speakers are "artistic verbal performers" (p. 57), referring particularly to the fluid melodic flow most often associated with Black preacher-hood and the melodies that accompany sermons. Dyson (2001) stated that not only does the melodic vernacular of preachers represent black language, but it permeates the Black experience: "The rhythms, idioms, semantics, syntax grammar, dialects, vernaculars, and rhetorics of black

language" accompany ways in which "blacks shape their social identities" (p. 227). These social identities may be upheaved, but also achieve fluidity based on social status, skin tone, and education. Without overgeneralizing, the literature around Black oral traditions, musical lyricism, Black preacher aesthetics, and so on is important, especially when the conversation turns to the representation of Black youth. To this end, Rose (1994) argued specifically for Hip Hop music, deflecting the idea that it is simply "a singular oral poetic form that appears to have developed autonomously (e.g., outside Hip Hop culture) in the 1970's" (p. 25). Viewing Hip Hop from oral literacy alone eliminates the innovative creations of DJ, Scratching, Break Dancing, Rhythm, and Graffiti.

The birth of Hip Hop helped "shape [African American] social identities" (Dyson, 2001, p. 227). Hip Hop has been argued to be a voice of the youth, stating truths, stating realities, and representing selves through the multi-tiered art form (Dyson, 2001; Hill-Collins, 2006; Hill, 2009). Today, in 2014, the emergence of multi-modal literacies and technology has expanded African American youth's broader schema of Afro-American social, cultural, and political development. Students are multi-modal and multi-technical, broadening the representation of themselves far beyond textual literacy. Technology expands the geography of race, making race a more globally complex notion. Black expressiveness can now be witnessed in the struggle against inequitable divides, not solely against the racial divide.

As a result, the African American experience is replicated across borders to a specific country's social constructs, while simultaneously imitating Black performance styles. Styles of Hip Hop beats, clothing, break dancing, and movement often associated with Hip Hop are clearly seen across races and borders. This crossing of Hip Hop's

borders is witnessed by You Tube representations spanning the globe: South Africa, Greece, Zimbabwe, Israel, Japan, to Iran. The globalization of Black popular music is a by-product of the use of technology, video, and internet representation. Youth often use Hip Hop to confront and express social inequities, no matter what country from which the creator represents.

Chapter III

METHODOLOGY

In undertaking this project on African American youth expressive identities and a school of engagement, I needed to research various websites to locate a school or community organization where African American teenagers seemed to engage actively in musical and artistic explorations, specifically producing works of art that represented their own interests and multi-identities. I was seeking an organization that allowed creative exploration and expression through multi-modal literacies, where the students' self-made works of art represented their originality and creativity. I was not interested in places where students engaged in the arts using strict traditional performance and practice skills.

Through the internet, I located the High School for Recording Arts (HSRA) in St. Paul, Minnesota. The school's website suggested that students here were able to demonstrate leadership in various entrepreneurial endeavors; some were finalists and winners in various local, state, and national artistic competitions while others traveled the world. According to the website www.hsra.org, HSRA "engage[s] students through music." Was this merely publicity and hype, I wondered? After many conversations with the founder of the school with whom I shared my research design, I discovered the school seemed genuine in its mission and I requested their participation in my study. HSRA agreed to be part of the research.

Design and Rationale

For this study, I chose to conduct an ethnographic qualitative research. Ethnographies are a form of qualitative research in which a researcher studies a place, scene, setting, or person over a relatively long period of time as a participant, a participant observer, or simply as an observer (Sells, Smith, Newfield, & Neal, 1997). Qualitative research best fit this project because of its emphasis on voice, subjectivity, and emotion (Silverman, 2010). The main objective of my research was to listen to and observe what African American students hope for and express through their chosen art form.

As part of ethnographic research, qualitative interviews have the potential to unmask multiple understandings of lived experiences within a diverse society and can promote equity and balance in education (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Tate, 1997b). However, as the review of literature revealed, research is lacking in understanding how African American youth feel about their educational experiences. Their stories that are overlooked or silenced often stem from historical power inequities.

Marshall and Rossman (2006) described four qualitative methods (p. 97), of which I identity and use three of the four. These three were: (a) direct observation, during which I sat in on classes and watched studio work, practice sessions, performances, and the like; (b) one-on-one in-depth interviews with teachers and students, each lasting one to two hours, and (c) analysis of documents and materials, including lyrics, videos, visual artifacts, CDs, and multi-media examples of student productions.

Research Questions

To better understand if or how identity, the arts, and educational systems might have the potential to foster the talents of African American youth and help them flourish, I divided my research questions into four different categories. The first two research questions focused on the expression of racial identity through the arts. The last two categories analyzed how the philosophies of the school contribute to pedagogy, curriculum, and learning.

1. *Institutional Identity and Race*: How does the institution foster purposeful exploration of racial identity? What institutional structures inhibit identity development and well-being?
2. *Race, Identity, and Creativity*: How does creativity foster the exploration and development of learner identity? How do African American students—assuming they do—express their racial identity through their creative work?
3. *Pedagogy*: How are the school's philosophies illustrated through the teaching and learning process? What pedagogical means are enacted to attend to student learning and engagement? What are its intended ends?
4. *Curriculum*: What curricula is implemented to attend to student learning and engagement? What are its intended ends?

Population Selection and Data Collection

Exemplary Sites

This research protocol required involving African American participants who seemed to be flourishing artistically. Ladson-Billings (1995a) considered flourishing

spaces as “exemplary spaces” and “exemplary pedagogues” for her research, and selected teachers and classrooms through the high recommendations of parents, teachers, and leadership. Her spaces were not considered exemplary on the basis of assessment and achievement scores, but on the basis of student and teacher perceptions in relation to teacher/student relationships, implementation of high expectations for students of color, and the effectiveness of critical engagement in the classroom.

This research required similar criteria for site selection when it came to understanding exemplary sites of student learning. It was important to locate a site where African American children were represented with high regard as contributors to society while artistically exploring and expressing their individual identities. At High School for Recording Arts (HSRA), I found that students seemed to be creatively exploring and inhabiting a sense of ownership within their educational experiences, while maintaining positive relationships within the school and community. In addition, HSRA seemed to allow African American youth to explore and perform multiple identities with little censorship. It seemed to be a space where exemplary learning and teaching were taking place and offered an engaging and rich mixture of opportunities for exploration. As identified by Toma (2000, cited in Marshall & Rossman, 2006), sites of possibility reside where:

> a) entry is possible; b) there is a high probability that a rich mix of the processes, people, programs, interactions, and structures of interest is present; c) the researcher is likely to be able to build trusting relations with the participants in the study; d) the study can be conducted and reported ethically; and e) data quality and credibility of the study are reasonably assured. (p. 62)

HSRA not only portrayed exemplary teaching and learning, but it was willing and eager to share accessibility to their students, teachers, and institution.

Data Collection Procedures

An unexpected turn of events occurred when I learned more about the student body: the majority of students with whom I developed relationships were 17-20 years old, or "over-aged and under-credited," as the program described them. Therefore, parental approval was not needed in the majority of instances. Because I had reached out to a few students who were 15 to 17 years old and received no replies, I chose students with whom I had close conversations in the recording studio. These students seemed to be in school almost every day, which offered me the opportunity to speak and develop more in-depth relationships with them. After observing them in their creative process, I was eventually able to schedule interviews with them. Teachers also identified some potential interviewees who might have "a lot to share" (Tonya, Social Worker), either because of their school leadership roles, their dedication to their art form, or their strong resilience.

My sample included 10 self-identified African American student interviewees (4 females, 6 males, spanning the age of 17 to 21). The focus group added four more student participants who were not individually interviewed. I interviewed 6 Leaders/Advisors from the school. (3 African American males, 1 male of mixed Caribbean cultural heritage, 1 Caucasian male, 1 Caucasian female). The majority of participants identified themselves as African American heterosexuals, and two female students identified themselves as lesbian.

I conducted all student interviews and a focus group during school hours in a shared office space with the housing advocate. The housing advocate was not present in the room during the interviews or focus group. I informed all participants that I would digitally audio record the interviews and transcribe them to ensure the accuracy of the

conversations and interactions. Once all the interviews were transcribed, I would delete the audio files, but might possibly use some of their information and quotes for the dissertation. After each interview session, I downloaded the interviews onto hard drives and erased the immediate data from the hand-held recording devices. To ensure that I would not lose entire documents due to technical failure, all data were stored on two password-encoded external hard drives. By contrast, I documented classroom observations through handwritten notes, with occasional audio recording of the class to review at a later time. Most students requested and granted permission to me to use their real names, given their entrepreneurial ways; they were literally eager to make a name for themselves. They provided me with their websites, You Tube names, Twitter accounts, and e-mail addresses. However, to maintain confidentiality for IRB protocol, I gave all my participants pseudonyms.

I visited the institution for 3½ weeks at the end of a school year. I arrived at the beginning of the school day and left between 5:00 and 7:00 p.m. each night (although many students were still producing in the studio when I left). The amount of time and length of stay proved sufficient for forming and nurturing relationships, for helping themes to emerge and develop, and, ultimately, for gaining a deep understanding of the relationships between teacher/mentor, student, art forms, and the institution.

My first intention was to develop rapport and familiarity with both the students and staff for two or three days, and I immediately focused on possible participants for interviewees, who would become the subjects of the portrait. I used this time to develop relationships with the participants while simultaneously gaining insight into the program. It was imperative that I maintain frequent communication with them, sharing parts of my

own personal history and my purpose in staying with students and faculty alike. Informal observations were an integral part of my first days. These included short dialogues with students while they were producing in the recording studios, editing video and photographic footage, and practicing for their upcoming performances. I also had spontaneous observations as I walked into community meetings and focused instructional time where I was a non-interactive observer.

Throughout the 3½ weeks, I interviewed 10 students and 6 adults for one to two hours each (I will expand on the interview questions later in this chapter). I also conducted one focus group with six students, some of whom I had intentionally not interviewed in order to gain a broader perspective of the school. Although I facilitated this semi-formal meeting, a natural progression took place and the students themselves became the main contributors to the conversation by sparking each other's responses, ideas, and thoughts.

Students also performed informally during the focus group session (which was used primarily for later data analysis), and this sparked conversation and discussion about lyrical content and the creative process. Silverman (2010) defined focus groups as "group discussions [that] are usually based upon stimuli (topics, visual aids) provided by the researcher" (p. 434). Stimuli, impromptu performances, and guided discussions were the driving force of this focus group.

Although I collected samples of students' artistic writing, most samples were obtained by observations of performances (approximately 11), catching impromptu ciphers, watching final project presentations, and attending graduation, an awards ceremony, and a community event. Each venue had opportunities for performance. As

Marshall and Rossman (2006) stated, “Research focusing on language and communication typically involves microanalysis of textual analysis through which speech events, including text, and subtle interactions are recorded and then analyzed” (p. 55). Textual analysis of students’ artistic expression of their performances, written prose, musical compositions, and musical arrangements sheds light on all forms of language and communication that are essential to the analysis. The textual analysis thus complements the chapters that present portraiture-style findings on how these students communicate and express their emerging identities as they become producers of knowledge through their art form.

To complete the research, I continued to correspond during the following school year with teachers, students, and leadership for accuracy checks. I often needed clarification on some lyrics from student CDs as well as on some of the courses offered. I also needed current and accurate statistics of the school’s demographics.

At the inception of the research, I did not foresee the importance of completely understanding students’ stories and backgrounds and how they relate to their artistic expression. Because of this, I did not purposefully frame specific questions about their personal upbringing and history. However, the students shared aspects of their lives quite openly, telling me of their histories, sexuality, religious upbringing, and the like. I gained a deep understanding as I pieced together all the interviews, observations, and analyses of available multi-media. However, when a student did not specifically mention information about his or her life, I omitted it from that student’s profile (presented above). For instance, if a student did not specifically tell me whether or not he or she had a child, I did not inquire or enter the information in their profiles.

Student Participants

I did not construct this research with the hope of finding a student body who followed the stereotype that most African American students have been incarcerated, live in poverty, get expelled from school, and other negative images. I am fully aware that social constructs create these situations and maintain these stereotypes through media representation and biased laws. However, I found that indeed the majority of the students' lives replicated these social constructs. For this reason, I have included personal information from the student participants displaying situations in their lives that have affected their educational experiences.

Jay D, a 20-year-old male, is scheduled to graduate at the end of the school year and has been attending the school for six months. I witnessed him participate actively with students and teachers. He has attended multiple high schools and voluntarily transferred to the current school. He had lived with his mother, brothers, and sisters in Chicago; has one child; and has been incarcerated five times. His art form he claims is rapping, writing, writing lyrics, and a little bit of producing. Jay D was also a focus group participant.

Deez, a 19-year-old male, is not yet ready to graduate and has been attending the school for two years. He has been expelled from his previous high school, has attended a few different high schools, and eventually transferred voluntarily. I witnessed him actively participating in school every day, mostly in classroom settings, where he worked on a computer. In a Hip Hop History and the Arts class, I witnessed his strength in improvisatory ciphering and rhythmic flow. Deez grew up in the same area as the school

and lives with his parents. He is social with friends and teachers. The art forms he claims are rapping, writing, poetry, videography, and photography.

Miles, a 19-year-old male who is scheduled to graduate the following year, has attended the school for approximately two years. I witnessed him actively participating in school every day, mostly in the afternoons and evenings. He participated in a week-long field trip to Hawaii, and, upon his return, was an active member in the prom and school performances. Miles assisted in organizing the community block party and participated in "HIV ain't no joke" promotions. I also saw him producing and editing in the studio and producing in the beat-making studio. Interactive with students and faculty alike, Miles lives with his mother, who was an active volunteer for the school. They had moved from Chicago with the rest of his siblings, but the siblings eventually returned to Chicago. Miles has had many interactions with the law but was never incarcerated. He has attended at least one previous high school in the area, been expelled from all other schools, and eventually transferred to this school voluntarily. His primary art forms are producing, beat-making, and rapping; he called himself a singer who did not like to sing.

Cashious, an 18-year-old male scheduled to graduate the following year, has been attending the school for approximately three years. I witnessed him actively participating in school every day: doing classroom work behind a computer, preparing for a presentation, rapping in the studio, assisting in producing others' tracks, writing lyrics, emceeing multiple performances, performing on stage, and interacting with students and faculty. He lived with his family in multiple cities, both suburban and metropolitan, and had attended multiple high schools, been expelled, and voluntarily transferred—dropping out once and returning. Cashious has multiple infractions with the law. The art forms he

claims are rapping and producing but he realized that his strength as an emcee was guiding him to consider entertainment journalism as a career. Cashious also participated in the focus group.

MJ, a 19-year-old male not yet scheduled to graduate, has been attending HSRA for approximately three years. He previously attended a different high school in the same vicinity and had voluntarily transferred to HSRA. I witnessed him doing computer work in preparation for a presentation. He has lived nearly his whole life in the same city and recently had a child. The art forms he claims are rapping, writing lyrics, and song writing.

DY, a 17-year-old male who is scheduled to graduate at the end of the school year, had been attending the school for approximately two years. I witnessed him actively participating in school every day in classroom activities, working behind a computer, preparing a presentation for a Department of Education state convention, laying tracks in the studio, practicing his verses, performing on stage, and interacting with students and faculty alike. Currently living with his aunt, DY has resided in suburbs and urban environments, attended five different high schools in three different states, has been completely homeless, developed a drug problem but recovered, and attempted suicide. DY has since become a state spokesman for the national 26 Seconds Campaign (Stay in School Campaign). He had voluntarily transferred to HSRA after having a few infractions with the law. He has been accepted at a music college in the same city for recording technology. The art forms DY claims are rapping, writing songs, recording, videography, and spoken word.

Cassey, an 18-year-old female who is not scheduled to graduate till the following year, she has been attending the school for approximately 3½ years. I witnessed her

actively participating in school; working behind a computer, at prom, and in the studio editing her song and lyrics with Peter (the sound engineering teacher); and primarily interacting with faculty. She grew up in the vicinity and is currently living in her own apartment after having been homeless. She previously attended a different high school but voluntarily transferred to HSRA. The art form Cassey primarily claims is visual art.

Dionne, an 18-year-old female, has just graduated but returned to intern and work on committees and projects in progress. She had previously attended a Performing Arts High School in the same city, she was an honors student in advanced placement courses, and voluntarily transferred. I witnessed her interacting with students and faculty alike, actively participating in the studio, listening critically to her own work, giving feedback to others in the studio, working in the deejay booth in preparation for a performance, performing multiple times, organizing the community block party, and participating in the "HIV ain't no joke" promotions. Dionne currently lives with her family and has been accepted into a major college, but because she had not received enough funding, she is re-applying to other universities. The art forms she claims are rapping, singing (a little), producing, videography, and the music business.

Lauren, a 20-year-old female, is scheduled to graduate at the end of the school year. I noticed that her sporadic participation in class usually consisted of attending schools on the days she was scheduled to perform. This was partially because she had almost completed all her credits for graduation. I witnessed her performing multiple times and interacting with students and faculty alike; I also watched her graduate. She had attended multiple high schools in the same vicinity and voluntarily transferred. She is living in a homeless shelter with her one child as she worked one job. For the summer,

she is starting her second job and has also been accepted into a local college for the following year. The art forms she claims are writing lyrics, poetry, and, by happenstance, singing.

Kamy, a 20-year-old female, is scheduled to graduate at the end of the school year. I witnessed her actively participating every day in classwork behind a computer, in the Hip Hop History and the Arts Class, and in the studio; listening critically to her work; working in the deejay booth; performing multiple times; and organizing the community block party and graduation. She is interactive with students and faculty alike, had attended multiple high schools in the general vicinity, and voluntarily transferred to HSRA. The art forms Kamy claims are writing lyrics, singing, and learning production.

Adult Leadership Participants

Although four of the six faculty I interviewed are African American, the entire teaching staff is mixed. During the research period, the teaching staff of advisors and Special Education teachers consisted of six Caucasian teachers and five teachers of African or African American descent. As a follow-up, in 2014 (a year later), the faculty consists of seven African or African American and six Caucasian advisors/teachers. It is important to note that the roles of advisors and teachers were fluid. Administrators also serve as student advisors and are often involved in the teaching. In short, the entire faculty and staff demographic is close to equally Black and White. The following profiles describe the adult leaders who participated in this study.

TJ, the founder and creator of High School for Recording Arts, is a former rapper, producer, entrepreneur, and performer. In developing the school, TJ eventually claimed its philosophies, worked with policy and law, and assisted in designing the school’s

pedagogy, teaching method, and curricula. He actively participates in daily activities and serves as the school's primary political spokesperson.

Tommy is the current Director of the School. He was at one time a practicing lawyer in New York City, and for this reason was recruited to align law, policy, and school development. He also serves partially as the faculty director, assisting with daily activities, teaching, curricula, and faculty relationships. He is also a trumpet player.

Niles is a teacher who has been at the school for one year. He developed the Hip Hop History and the Arts class, and produced videos and a CD with the students. He had previously lived in Michigan and New York City as a multi-tiered artist, singer, musician, and actor. He is a performance mentor and motivational speaker, with previous experience producing his own CDs. He continues to be actively engaged as a musician, actor, teacher, and rapper, as well as an emcee for local events, a spoken-word artist, and a visual artist.

Peter was recruited by TJ, as a founding member of the team. Being a former producer, studio owner, and entrepreneur, Peter serves as the school's audio engineer, sound technician, mentor, teacher and studio organizer.

Donny is the Special Education teacher. He has been at the school for almost nine years and has taught various courses, including the Urban Music course. Although the course was not active during this research period, the students remembered it very well for the large number of songs that was produced in the class. Donny spoke about bringing the course back during the following school year.

Bonney is one of the administrative assistants. She is in charge of enrollment, statistical analysis, graduation numbers, and adherence to state standard regulations and

governmental policy mandates. She taught math at a previous school and periodically serves that role at HSRA.

Focus Group Members Not Individually Interviewed

While some students who participated in the focus group were personally interviewed, others were not, but their eagerness and natural inquisitiveness about the arts contributed greatly to the content of the focus group. Their profiles are presented below.

Autumn, an 18-year-old female, is projected to graduate the following school year. I witnessed her acting as a photographer for events, singing and rapping during performances, braiding other students' hair, editing videos and photographs, dancing, and interacting with teachers and students alike. She is a national 26 Seconds spokeswoman for the Stay in School campaign. Although she had been homeless, she is currently living on her own. Autumn had attended multiple high schools in suburban and urban environments and then voluntarily transferred. Her three sisters had attended the school as well. The art forms she claims are a lyricist, singer, and rapper, with her main focus on video production and photography.

Dean, a 19-year-old male, is projected to graduate the following school year. I witnessed him rapping on stage, doing school work on a computer, and interacting with a teacher but mostly with students. He had lived in multiple states (he counted eight), attended multiple high schools (most recently in Chicago), previously attended high school in the same city as his new school, and voluntarily transferred. Dean had multiple infractions with the law, including incarceration. The art forms he claims are rapping, lyricist, and production.

Jason, a 19-year-old male, is projected to graduate the following year. I witnessed him in the Hip Hop History and the Arts Class, involved in improvisatory ciphering, rapping, acting in a video, editing video footage, and performing on stage. He lives with family, previously attended a different high school, and voluntarily transferred. The art forms he claims are lyricist, rapper, producer, and video editor.

Khristine, a 17-year-old female, has been attending HSRA for approximately three months. I witnessed her interacting with friends, performing on stage, working on the computer, producing in the studio, and being very social. She lives with her family and had voluntarily transferred to HSRA. The art forms she claims are Producing, Singing, Song Writing, Rapping.

Table 1 provides a quick reference guide to the participants, both the adult leaders and the students.

Data Analysis

My data analysis relied heavily on interviews, a focus group, observations, and documents. Audio recording devices were frequently used to capture the data, as was watching media on the web, collecting artistic samples of recordings, and attending performances. I recorded 16 interviews, one focus group meeting, multiple classroom observations, observations of students working in the studio, and the graduation ceremony. I also attended nine performances, including the final block party performance of the community. In addition, data analysis included collecting six CDs, watching a site-based You Tube channel with over 168 videos uploaded in the past year alone, and watching students' You Tube profiles.

Table 1

Participants

Adult Leadership Name (Gender)	Subject or Role in School	Ethnicity/Race	Former Career
TJ (M)	Creator of School: Spokesman, Advocate, Oversees all aspects of the School	African American	Producer, Rapper, Pilot, Entrepreneur
Tommy (M)	Head of School: Oversees Administration, Teaching, Learning, Politics, Law	African American	Lawyer, Entertainment Law, Politics
Peter (M)	Sound Engineer	Caucasian	Owner of Studio
Donny (M)	Special Education Advisor and taught Urban Music.	African American	Teacher
Niles (M)	Advisor and teaches Hip Hop History and the Arts.	African American/ Caribbean Descent	Musical Performer, Produced own music, Actor, Visual Artists, Emcee
Bonney (F)	Administration	Caucasian	Teacher

Student Name (Gender)	Age	Year in School	Living Situation	Incarceration	Former Expulsion	Arts
Kamy (F)	20	Unknown	Family	No	Yes	R, S, LY, SW, R
Dean (M) Focus Groups	19	Unknown	Family	No	Yes	R, LY, PR
Jay D (M)	20	Less than a year	Family and Daughter	Yes (4-5)	Yes	PR, LY, R, WR
Deez (M)	19	2 years	Family	Unknown	Yes	R, WR, V, P, LY
Miles (M)	19	3 years	Family	No	Yes	PR, BM, R, S
Cashious (M)	18	3 years	Family	Infractions	Yes	PR, R, EM, V

Table 1 (continued)

Student Name (Gender)	Age	Year in School	Living Situation	Incarceration	Former Expulsion	Arts
MJ (M)	19	3-4 years	Girlfriend and Child	Unknown	Yes	R, LY, W, SW
DY (M)	17	1½-2 years	Family, Previously homeless	Infractions	Yes	R, LY, PR, V, SW, BM, 26 Seconds Ambassador
Cassey (F)	18	3 years	Previously homeless, now on own	Unknown	Yes	VA, WR
Dionne (F)	18	Graduated	Family	No	No	PR, W, SW, V
Lauren (F)	20	2 years	Homeless with Child	No	Unknown	W, SW, V, P
Autumn (F) Focus Groups	18	2-3 years	Living on own	Unknown	No	R, S, V, P, W, 26 Seconds Spokeswoman
Jason (M) Focus Groups	19	1 year	Unknown	Yes	Yes	R, LY, PR, V
Kristine (F) Focus Groups	17	Less than 1 year	Family	Unknown	Yes	R, PR, S, SW, LY

Key to Abbreviations: BM = Beat Making, EM = Emcee, LY = Writing Lyrics, P = Photography, PR = Producing, R = Rap, S = Singing, SR = Song Writing, SW = Spoken Word, V = Videography, VA = Visual Arts, WR = Writing

I followed, in varying degrees, Marshall and Rossman's (2006) seven steps of research and data analysis as: (1) organizing data, (2) immersion in the data, (3) generating categories and themes, (4) coding the data, (5) offering interpretations through analytic memos, (6) searching for alternative understandings, and (7) presenting the data (p. 156). I used each category to varying degrees.

I initially transcribed all interviews as well as CD lyrics verbatim, and selected three You Tube videos for verbatim transcription as well. In no particular order, I also transcribed interesting classroom conversations. I used phonetic transcription for the interviews to capture the participants' meaning and inflection and contribute to the portraiture style of writing I planned to use to present my data. I then listened to all the interviews several more times, sometimes in conjunction with the transcriptions, and began to notice certain main themes surface. This open form of coding allowed me time to analyze how the themes aligned with my original research questions. Interrelated themes also emerged, which sometimes complicated my effort to fit the themes into specific categories according to the research questions. Therefore, I returned to analyzing the interviews to gain a deeper understanding of the participants' meanings and stories to identify the themes. The number of themes exceeded the anticipated amount and required careful analysis to place smaller themes under the umbrella of larger themes. I continued to identify recurring smaller themes that aligned with emerging larger themes—and these ultimately aligned with the original research questions.

In summary, following Marshall and Rossman's plan, I went from micro-level analysis to macro-level identifications, placing emerging themes with pre-identified research questions. The two macro-level themes of the research questions revolved

around: (a) program structure, curriculum, and learning; and (b) the relation between racial identity and its expression through the arts. These two themes yielded a multitude of categories that intertwined with each other.

Researcher Positionality

The data collection and analysis process can be greatly affected by how a researcher positions herself within the research project. For this reason, it was important for me to decide on my intended extent of interactions with students before the research began. I found my position resting between that of an interactive observer and a silent observer. It was important that I develop relationships with both students and faculty to help eliminate mistrust, judgment, and suspicion of my agenda. By positioning myself as an inquisitive observer and supporter of their art form, I was given access to their lives. I also became more comfortable with students as our interactions increased. This positioned me as an interactive observer, even though I did not actively participate in their work.

Once trusting relationships were developed, I was able to shift into the role of a more or less silent observer, collecting data with little interaction. The two forms of positioning—first as an inquisitive and interactive researcher, then as a silent observer—might have altered my findings. My initial interactions with the students may possibly have reinforced fear and distrust among the student body, yet it also could have created trust and reinforced positive intentions. For instance, the parents of two students under the age of 18 did not permit participation from their child. This could have perhaps been because of distrust (although the reason was never disclosed). However, establishing a

rapport with the students through inquisitive interaction was of the utmost importance for data collection. For most students, it did seem to increase their interest in participating.

It is critical to point out that I am from a White, middle-class American background. My biological family consists of two married parents of the opposite sex who had three children (one boy, two girls). As I approached adolescence, I claimed a heterosexual lifestyle and eventually had a daughter from a long-term relationship with an Afro-Caribbean male. However, my upbringing in a White middle-class family inhibited me from experiencing others' lived experiences. I never experienced what it was like to be identified as homeless, Latina, or African American, to name a few other classifications different from mine. I learned early on that my racial position entitled me to economic privilege, but I remember questioning inequities in societal gaps at a very early age. My dad was employed by an influential governmental agency, and we traveled extensively and lived in various parts of the world. When we lived in the outback of Australia, I wondered why the Aborigines had few economic resources and why the Whites seemed to have the political power. At an early age, I began to understand that race mattered in social status and political equity, but I still benefited from being White. I simply continued to observe and question the discrepancies between the different races and cultures.

Critical educators Ford and Dillard (1996) have discussed how educators should explore the dichotomies of appreciating and loving where we come from and "questioning in order to reconstruct" (p. 234). This is true for my own identity as well: loving where I came from, critically analyzing my social status and privilege, and being open to learning from others. Yet, as Ajayi (2011, cited in Hall, 1990) stated, "Cultural

Identity is a matter of 'becoming' as well as 'being'" (p. 655). All of our identities are forever shaping, forming, and "becoming" with each new experience and by the people we meet, as well as the conscious decisions that affect our lives. Ajayi added that "Identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narrative of the past" (p. 655). My racial and economic identities are ever flowing, changing, and growing with each new choice and experience.

As I developed into adulthood, my path became influenced more by choice rather than by circumstances of birth. As most youth grow into adults, the choices they make affect their historical selves. Characters begin to deepen and interests evolve to a greater degree as they make choices that pertain to their individuality. My choices and individuality led me through a plethora of cultural exploration and musical endeavors. My choice of a Black Caribbean partner thrust me into different cultural exchanges and lifestyles of choice. Raising an interracial child was another life-altering choice of multi-cultural immersion. Living my daily life with dual identities began to shape my lived experience: I was a White woman who benefited from the system, but being a White woman with a Black child demanded a very different approach to life. Racial biases and experiences started to affect me personally. I was forced to live racial prejudice and bias. I experienced the bias against White/Black love relationships and how they are perceived by various races, including the inequities of access to space.

My immersion into newly lived experiences created a new being. Rather than being a White woman of economic privilege, I was learning how to live mixed identities. When I was alone, I was a White woman with racial privilege, but when I was with my daughter and/or her father, I was perceived differently and had less access to everything. I

was even denied as a family member by some. In addition to the change in my racial identity, my economic identity changed. During the early stages of motherhood, I became dependent on state support, and for this reason, I learned the obstacles of poverty. Simultaneously, I was raising my child as Black. I made a conscious decision to fill my child's life with African, Caribbean, and African American experiences. Along the way, however, I realized that simple exposure to a variety of cultures does not necessarily bring heart-felt understanding and empathy for others; this depends on individuals' willingness to position themselves within the racial and social status of various cultures. Yet, my dual identities still prevented me from complete immersion into any single one.

My experiences have guided my work with African American youth who identify themselves, and are identified by others, in multiple ways. I have gained a deep understanding of the social, political, economic, and racial nuances of American society. However, self-identification does not always replicate how one is perceived by others. Therefore, my initial appearance as a White woman could have affected my research, which I discuss below as a possible limitation.

Limitations

I acknowledge that my race, age, and gender as a mid-career Caucasian woman could have dampened or altered responses when discussing racial experience and expression. My attempts to develop relationships of trust and comfort during the beginning stages of this research might have assisted in establishing comfort levels, but could not have possibly eradicated the historical underpinnings of racial oppression within the students' experience—thereby "watering down" their responses to a become more politically correct.

Chapter IV

A DESCRIPTION: SPACE, CHARACTERS, AND PHILSOPHIES

In this chapter, I describe, in the portraiture style of writing I have previously introduced, the physical space, characters, and school's philosophies that contribute to a dynamic social learning environment. This method allows for a deep understanding of the school's role in its students' lives and how it contributes to their learning and development. This is why I emphasize student voices: these are the voices that offer insight into how schools can better serve a student body affected by 'historical inequities' of poverty, homelessness, and incarceration, which previously had led many of these students to drop out of traditional schools. More broadly, their voices offer insight for education—and for music education, specifically—by showing what works for these students at the High School for Recording Arts (HSRA).

Alienating Exterior, Surprises Within

This inconspicuous school is located in a warehouse district, in an old factory building, connected to a four-lane highway, surrounded by factories with semi-trailer trucks merging to and from the interstate freeway. Everything about the school looks small from the outside. It has only a small sign with the school's name painted on the front door, and no banner or large concrete engraving stating the school's significance. I also notice that the parking lot is small, holding only about 15 cars. But it seems

sufficient as I eventually notice most students walking to and from the closest public transportation stop.

At 1:00 p.m. I arrive for the first day, and a few students are hanging outside, having their lunch, laughing, and walking to and from the local convenience store. I walk up to the front door, press the buzzer, and progress through a second set of doors in order to introduce myself to a young man about 30 years old, sitting behind the front desk. I immediately notice a shift in energy and realize that the outside gives no indication of the activity happening inside. There are plenty of students socializing around the front desk area—it is a welcomed surprise. There is a sizable seating area for about six people to the left side of the room, with a television mounted high on the wall. It is playing students' music videos and creating a bit of awe in me because the videos look so professional and polished. This sparks my curiosity even more, and I wonder if the students produced both the music and the videos. I haven't asked; I figure I will soon find out.

Behind the front desk area there is a glass wall, and on the other side, I see eight or nine students, hanging and talking. I assume they are just on break, but I find out later that they are outside two recording studios, waiting for their studio time to begin. I introduce myself to the front desk attendant as students intently watch me. I tell him that I am here to meet Polly, the Education Director. He calls her on her cell phone and she appears shortly with a big smile and welcoming aura, and greets me. Shaking my hand, she looks in my eyes and asks about my travels. We stand for only a moment in conversation—then she begins to walk me through to the other side of the glass door and our conversation stops as she greets, interacts, and jokes with the numerous students waiting for their studio time. I am eager to go in, too, but I wait. Life is everywhere. In

contrast to the cold industrial location on the outside, a feeling of camaraderie reveals itself to me, putting me at ease.

A Different Kind of Layout

Polly walks me down one hall with the ever-present windowless hallway that has industrial 1970s carpeting. It seems rather dark, but hosts four or five busy, multi-functional small rooms. The activity brings the building to life.

I enter the radio station where students are editing a pre-recorded show. Editing equipment, a microphone, plush chairs, warm lighting, and a welcome feeling engulf me as I enter this tiny room, which is no bigger than six by seven feet. Outside, the hall buzzes with activity as we make our way past the social worker's office. Students are sitting everywhere, on the couches, chairs, on laps, and the arms of chairs, while they talk, eat, and laugh. Farther down the hall is the faculty bathroom, shared by both genders, and I feel the bass-ridden beat coming from the dance studio across from it. We walk past the studio and I see students practicing while fellow classmates sit watching, giving feedback, or just hanging.

We turn the corner and walk into the untraditional layout of the school called the *advisory area*. I notice that this large open space creates a cohesive environment in the school. It is sectioned off by four-foot-high walls that are intentionally short enough to allow people a view across the entire room; the shortened walls are dividers of the different advisory areas. Approximately six different advisory spaces are lined with a number of computers against the walls. Most advisory areas have a table in the middle designated for collaborative work, some are currently in use, and some are not. I notice

that each advisor has their own desk, filing cabinets, bookshelves, and posters posted on the walls. Pictures of Maya Angelou, Yasiin Bey, Malcom X, Martin Luther King, and Miles Davis bring sounds, speeches, history, and activism to my senses, leading me to wonder why these particular African American icons are represented. I consider the implications of Malcom X being displayed, as most educational institutions shy away from anything so obviously revolutionary, so I gather that this school is not afraid to step into new territory most often excluded from more traditional schools.

I would like to emphasize that this open spaced learning environment seems to create a sense of community and collaboration. I have never experienced such a place for African American students, which encourages collaboration and activity without an amalgamation of rules, closed doors, and exclusionary policies. Even more noticeable is the fact that there are no metal detectors or tardy passes, and that cell phones are even allowed. This place intrigues me more and more.

Physical Space Meets Relationships and Learning

As I begin to contemplate how the physical organization of the school is designed to encourage communal learning, Polly continues the tour. She tells me of the multitude of projects that are happening, the most immediate of which is the three-day bike trip that about six students and three faculty members are going on. They begin in Montreal and end in Quebec. Since they have been studying environmental sustainability, they self-composed, produced, and recorded the songs that will be playing from speakers placed on one of the bikes, promoting bike safety and *Going Green*.

“Cool,” I think to myself, “an innovative way to be interdisciplinary”!

We continue on our tour and Polly introduces me to Damien, the video-production teacher, who is currently immersed with a small group of students, preparing for their presentation later in the afternoon at the Minnesota State Department of Education. “They’ve been asked to design a logo and a campaign flyer for the Department [of Education],” Polly informs me. Damien asks one of the students to talk me through their artistic process. “We just took their old flyer that was kind of boring, and made it look more interesting,” the student says with a laugh as if the project was easy and self-explanatory. The vibrant colors and lively animated characters bring the paper to life, telling the audience to *Stay in School!* Polly continues, “They’re presenting it at a conference today.” I’m wondering how they do it all—and I realize that the staff has to be innovative, reliable, and energetic to handle such a busy schedule.

Polly walks me down a long zigzagging ramp where special education classes are held, but it is currently empty. We walk back up the ramp, and this time I notice another large glass wall. I look through the glass into a room filled with colorful oil paintings of Michael Jackson, the Hulk, Wrestlemania, and more. I think this must be the visual arts room, but learn that it is the Dean of Student’s office, who is an artist himself.

We walk past the office and enter the multi-functional cafeteria, which has about eight lunch tables in neatly lined rows. An elevated stage is at the front of the cafeteria, with large speakers, both on the floor and hanging from the ceiling. A grand piano and a dismantled drum set stand close to the stage. The DJ booth, which also functions as the sound system and video booth, is at the back of the cafeteria and elevated about three feet from the ground, able to fit about three people at a time. A teacher and a student are in the booth talking and preparing the equipment for student presentations later in the day.

The sound of a PowerPoint presentation startles me as it begins to play on the permanent video screen behind the stage. As I watch them working, I begin to understand the depth of collaboration that happens between students and teachers. It seems to be happening everywhere. I notice that the arts, production, and creativity are everywhere.

I contemplate this as we cross in and out of a small kitchen with no current activity, and when we turn the corner, I see a wall plastered with pictures of alumni, performances, dignitaries, dreadlocked yoga teachers, and trips abroad. An admirer of both Yasiin Bey and George Clinton, I notice their pictures as *special* music visitors.

We continue down the hall of memorabilia when it abruptly stops and becomes a rather long hallway lined with lockers, studios, and offices. A tech specialist is working in his office to the right, so we walk across the hall instead, and go into the video production room, where students are busy editing their projects on the three large-screen computers. It becomes apparent to me that teachers and students alike constantly use technology, the web, and their cell phones as a form of social media, as well as for learning itself. It brings to mind a cohort of scholars who acknowledge the importance of nurturing multi-modal literacies, including technology. Yet, as Morrell (2012) notes, "[Educators] You have no doubt yelled at some of these youth about their mobiles, their tablets . . . their iPods . . . that aren't allowed on campus or most campuses for that matter" (p. 301). I wonder why this school allows them on their premises, and whether these students are just goofing off (as I've been engrained to think). Or could they still be working and engaged?

I consider why predominately African American high schools in metropolitan areas usually collect cellphones for the day at security scanning, while these students,

who are also African American city-dwellers, use them as a tool for learning? I resist the urge to assume that they are abusing their rights, and observe, instead. I then can see that their phones give them an opportunity to gather together, discuss, provide feedback, ask questions, stay connected, and learn. The situation actually reminds me of a real-life studio, where a team sits around working, using social media, and simultaneously producing.

As we stand in the video production room, Polly runs into a student who "really needs to speak with" her, so I intentionally get caught in this room, and she assigns a student (DY), to take over my tour. I meet an intern who graduated a couple of years earlier, and he shares with me the video made by a graduate who has recently been signed to a major label. I see another student wearing long, colorful tube socks, hi-top Converse sneakers, dreadlocks, shorts, red lipstick, and a nose ring. Her smile lights up the room and I make a mental note that I want to interview her. I ask her what she is working on and she takes me through a plethora of photographs she has taken for a fellow classmate's CD cover. Everywhere, I see intent, productive students—and they are notably without constant supervision.

DY continues my tour down the hall, showing me a large open room with very little in it. "It used to be filled with computers and sound-editing equipment, but many students were going in there to play on Facebook, so they took the computers out." That tells me that this is not a free-for-all school, and that learning and behavioral expectations do exist. I then notice a lone electric drum set in a corner under a poster of Miles Davis. Unique, larger-than-life, neatly produced, pencil drawings plaster the adjacent wall. Students drew their musical favorites, such as Whitney Houston, Michael Jackson, Bob

Marley, Marvin Gaye, Ozzie Osbourn, and Ray Charles. I am inclined to think that this school allows freedom of expression through visual, musical, technical, and hands-on learning, but I try to make no assumptions.

We finish our tour in the beat-production room. A gap between the floor and the door allows sound to seep through the hallways, and a techno beat: un, chi, un, chi, un, chi, un, chi, emerges as we walk in. A young man who is sporting a baseball cap with a puffy ponytail popping out, a sleeveless hoody, and jeans with chains hanging from pocket to pocket, is on the computer making the beat. As we enter and exit, he remains intent on his production. Turning the corner, we arrive back at the front of the building—but the school will be moving into a multi-million-dollar facility during the summer and begin a new year, anew.

DY takes me to see Tommy, the Director of the School. He is sitting at the round desk in his office, behind his computer, attached to his cell phone, dressed in a suit, a Yankees baseball cap, and tennis shoes. He enthusiastically sits me down and I immediately notice that the office is a revolving door. People come in and out. Knocks rap on the door and it opens for students or faculty to enter and state their business. Secretaries and assistants come in and place papers between Tommy, his computer, and cell phone, as they give him a brief description of what he is signing. He signs and they leave, only to have someone else enter. All of this takes place while Tommy shows me student-produced videos. They look so professional and polished and I wonder if the students do all the editing? He tells me that the students do almost all the production work from start to finish, but then he quickly focuses on the student DY who brought me into the office. Tommy asks him about the progress in securing a site for an upcoming

event. “Wow,” I think, “faculty relies on these students to organize and create events?” DY replies, “I’m working on getting my projects done for graduation, so I haven’t had time, but I’ll get back to you by Friday and let you know what I’ve come up with. Is there a particular thing you are looking for?” Tommy replies, “I want a rooftop restaurant somewhere downtown.” I have hardly ever witnessed students taking on such collaborative roles with teachers. The belief that students are respected enough to forge self-disciplined tasks in collaboration with faculty is rare so I become more astute to the possibilities here.

In walk two teachers that I haven’t met yet. They are wearing shorts, t-shirts, bike helmets, and beaming smiles. The taller one says, “Our flight was fun. Each student got to *fly* the plane, hold the gears, and everything. They didn’t land or take off, but they all flew.” The shorter one continues, “Tasha (a student) told me, ‘Wow, I can be a pilot, too!’” And the teacher goes on to say, “But what made my year was when I pulled up on my bike this morning and guess who was parked in my bike spot? Travone! I was so happy. I saw him this morning and gave him a big hug!! I told him, ‘You made my year!’” They all laugh and enjoy the moment. Tommy asks, “With the bike he built?” “Yeah!” she replies. By this time Polly has rejoined us and she tells me that the students and teachers built the bikes they were using for the Canada trip. The female teacher recognizes her own happiness, filling the room with excitement as she exits, “Sometimes I wonder if I ever really work?” A slight chuckle reverberates in the room, and Tommy returns to his computer in an attempt to find a hotel in Canada, while he plays me a song from their CD titled, *Keepin it Wheel*. The cohesive relationship between students and teachers seem to encourage a trusting, independent, and creative learning environment

where students envision possibilities for themselves, not only as musicians, but as "a pilot, too!"

The Genesis

Students had not always envisioned such possibilities for themselves. The school was established with "the root of the genesis as the young black male" (TJ, June 5th). TJ discloses that love for a historically underserved population has rooted and permeated all aspects of this school's life. It was initially created to serve African American males who displayed disengaged behavior at their previous high schools through a high rate of truancy, multiple expulsions, and the like. However, it has also and more recently acquired a high percentage of homeless youth, and students who have lived in multiple cities. I expand on each one of these later in the chapter, but it is important to consider how these situations affect educational engagement.

The founder of the school believes in the productive capabilities of African American students, and identifies this school as "his life's work," acknowledging that he was in a position to "help the community" (TJ, June 5th), and that everything he did prior to this work was "preparation for it." He was a pilot, a music-business entrepreneur, a recording artist who toured with Prince, and a juvenile correctional worker. He also had been signed with a prominent record label and is a 40-plus year old family man who quit his drug habit 24 years earlier. "Cocaine was my drug of choice, but I had problems with everything," he acknowledges.

Eventually, TJ opened a recording studio in downtown Minneapolis, during which he noticed that kids were always hanging around downtown and skipping school. Some

of them became intrigued with what was happening in his studio and kept asking to come in. But then, TJ told me:

> One time, they pointed out that a client didn't show up and there was time [to come in]. So they went in and they really just kind of blew me away with how talented they were. They wanted to know everything I knew about the music business, publishing to copywriting. (TJ, June 5th)

As he took time to listen to these young men, he began to hear how much they "hated school and they wanted to learn more about the business." He saw a need in the community: "All these young people of color weren't engaging in getting their high school diploma, but they were motivated in educating themselves, with regards to what they wanted to learn." He recognized their desire for alternative forms of education—one that, as Maxine Greene (1988) writes, interests them to "reach toward wider spaces for fulfillment, to expand options, to know alternatives" (p. 5).

I saw this as I walked through the school. There is vibrant artistic activity everywhere; students are seeking out this alternative space and options. TJ understands this because he had a similar educational experience that had led to his own disengagement: he was diagnosed with ADD and placed in Special Education with "all the labels, learning disabled." This was part of the reason why he became part of a solution to re-engaged African American males. "It really resonated with me to figure out a way to engage them through their passion." This relates to the crux of my first research question: What is this institution doing to attract, retain, and engage African American youth in their educational experience? Engaging them through their passion is why TJ created a locally organized grassroots educational institution.

Creating such an organization required TJ to find a team who shared his vision and reverence for a cause. And this brings me to introduce a few of the school leaders.

Peter, the first teacher TJ hired is the sound engineer. He unintentionally commands one's attention by his 6'4" frame and his penetrating voice of loving authority. He joined TJ at the inception of the original downtown studio, which then had 15 young male students. Once the studio was underway, TJ realized he needed assistance in legal matters, political obstacles and the like, so he recruited Tommy, an entertainment lawyer from the East Coast. Tommy was referred to by students as "a baller" (DY)—one who appreciates finer things in life. He often comes to school dressed in a suit, tennis shoes, and a New York team's baseball cap, representing his Brooklyn home base. His role has expanded to assist with running all aspects of the school. Polly, the educational director, was heavily recruited to join the growing team. She guides the pedagogy and the implementation of standards, and aligns policy and education.

The school has been in existence for 12 years as of this writing. The downtown studio of 15 young men has grown into their current industrial site, serving approximately 250 plus students diversified in both gender and to race, but it still attracts mostly African American males. The school continues to grow, and shortly after the research the school moved to their third site which is much larger: a rebuilt Bally's Total Fitness Center. They remain primarily dedicated to African American youth who have previously displayed educational disengagement.

Historical Implications of Lived Experiences

Although this school serves mostly African American students, I want to be clear that I do not subscribe to the stereotype that all African American students are poverty-stricken, homeless, disengaged in school, and have been imprisoned. I did not predict or

expect this particular school to serve a student body with such a high rate of homelessness and previously incarcerated youth. I was not seeking a school with this particular populations—I was seeking one that attracts and engages African American youth through the arts.

What I do suggest is that economic, historical, political, and judicial injustices continue the cycle of a racialized inequity in our society, affecting all things educational. This understanding is the reason I came to use CRT as a framework in the literature review, because historical carryovers in the educational system affect African American experience disproportionately. The fact that the school's genesis came from attracting mostly African American students, bears witness that most of these students carried with them a history of injustice. The students were seeking out an alternative space to flourish. I refer, for example, to Margaret Beale Spencer, Elizabeth Noll, Jill Stoltzfus, and Vinay Harpalani (2001), who identify that micro and macrolevel systemic racism target African American students:

> The consequences of systematic and institutionalized problematic processes for minorities, particularly for visible groups such as African Americans, result in at least a twofold set of outcomes for youth. First, minority youth in America often live and mature in extremely challenging environments that are depicted generally by significant structural barriers to success. These system-wide structural obstacles effect conditions within the family, neighborhood, workplace, and school contexts, along with the interactions among these different contexts. The relations between settings and the larger social, economic, and political forces in American society are also impacted. In effect, these challenges are not offset by near-equivalent sources of social and structural supports. A substantial number of African American youth demonstrate resiliency despite these challenging circumstances. However, instances of minority adolescents' resilience (i.e., success and competence despite adverse living conditions) often go unrecognized. Accordingly, a lack of understanding of cultural contexts leads to a misinterpretation of minority youth behavior and development. (p. 23)

First, Spencer and her researchers identify that systemic social, economic, and political systems create environments of "obstacles" for many African American people. And second, students' success often goes unnoticed, which continues a cycle of misinterpreting and misrepresenting African American youth. While revisiting a reading by Cornel West, I became fully aware that, perhaps subconsciously, I have expanded on his notion of historical inequalities. West (1993a) claims, "to engage in a serious discussion of race in America, we must begin not with the problems of black people but with the flaws of American society—flaws rooted in historic inequalities and longstanding cultural stereotypes" (p.3). I stand by this claim—that historically implemented political, judicial, and economic inequities continue to affect African American society, even in the 21st century, after Affirmative Action, after Obama, and after Trayvon Martin.

It is also necessary to state that not all African American students have the same experience, and for this reason I do not limit African Americans into one category. I acknowledge that all African American experiences are not the same, but that historically inequitable policies create exclusivity and inequality (Gossett, 1963, 1997; Womack, 2010). Concerning my study, the stories and histories of *this* particular African American student body *do* reflect the exclusive practices of inequality, and I paid special attention to how historic inequalities have affected their educational engagement. The fact that 99% of my interviewees had been expelled from their previous schools (some have multiple expulsions from multiple schools, and only one voluntarily transferred while being on the honor roll at her former music conservatory) speaks volumes about a systemic epidemic.

Micro and macro injustices manifest in many forms within this student body, but a deep connection to poverty is a primary catalyst for the other social manifestations. Poverty certainly exists in other places, but the historical context of financial exclusion bears weight on students in the 21st century. Poverty is the underlying root of the students' other lived experiences, which were termed "obstacles" by TJ, Peter, and Autumn, who reinforce Spencer's (2011) point that students have many obstacles to overcome—obstacles that are embedded in institutions racialized systems. "Obstacles" can be a debated word—a word of deficit-order thinking rather than one focused on possibility—but since many participants used the term, I will use it in this research.

In addition, most students, for example, lived in the "projects" (their term), an intentionally constructed, segregated, racialized form of poverty in which they are excluded from many resources (Massey & Denton, 1993). Whether or not students themselves think that coming from the projects is a racially constructed exclusion of resources is not the point. Instead, as Donny states, "They just kind of talk about the conditions, you know. These are systemic stuff, like teen homelessness and family…all of those are systemic" (Donny, June, 6th).

A second effect of poverty that I found is that students relocated from city to city (DY, Interview). They said this was because of their parents' need to find work or to flee crime-ridden neighborhoods where they themselves were "getting into too much trouble" (Interview, Miles).

A third manifestation of poverty aligns with incarceration rates among African American males. As Michelle Alexander (2010, 2012) states, "I understood the problems plaguing poor communities of color, including problems associated with crime and rising

incarceration rates, to be a function of poverty . . . ” (p. 3). This is consonant with research that suggests that African American males who become incarcerated at one point or another during their lives tend to come from poverty. The opposite is true, as well: incarceration affects poverty levels.

The same judicial, economic, political, and educational policies that historically produced these effects continue to plague African American students, not only at HSRA, but across the country. And it is being ignored. Intentionally, and perhaps sometimes unintentionally, this school tailors its philosophies to teaching and learning practices that recognize the historical inequities that its students face.

Four Philosophies

It has been my experience that schools create philosophies or mission statements that they only periodically revisit. I remember many professional development projects, where we briefly glanced over our school’s mission statement, only to forget it a couple of months later. But during my short time at HSRA, I quickly learned the four main philosophies that guide the school are: Family, Community, Respect, and Education. When I heard about this, I wondered if it were just another mission statement to be quickly forgotten, or whether its ideals were implemented and observed throughout school life. One day, in the later stages of my visit, I was in Tommy’s office, he asks. “Has anyone shown you the pilot episode that MTV came to film at the school?” “No,” I reply. He tells me that HSRA did not agree to shoot more than one episode because TJ was not offered final say on editing, therefore, he would not have control over how the students were represented. In any case, the following scene displays how deeply the

students understand that the four philosophies of Family, Community, Respect, and Education. In the scene, a young man is tucked away in a secluded sound booth making a staged intercom announcement. His heightened energy ignites throughout the school:

> Family is what we is
> Getting us a second chance no matter where we been
> Taking these minor misfits off of the streets
> And letting us give back to the community
> Learning is a must
> Respect is the key
> It changed the life of a guy like me.
> Now I'm off of the streets and music is what I'm making
> While I'm at school I'm getting my education.
> (Taken from http://www.youtube.com/user/HSRAMinnesota)

Family, Community, Respect, and Education are apparent in this example. However, I perceive a fifth and unstated philosophy that roots the four. Without a *love* for this particular student body, a school that was created with and for young black males, the four other philosophies could not flourish. At present, love is often eliminated from the discourse on education, with the exception of a select few scholars who talk about it as a powerful basis of education—especially bell hooks (2003b). She explores the idea that love for students is often displayed in the classroom through a democratic, engaging, learning environment: "when we teach with love we are better able to respond to the unique concerns of individual students while simultaneously integrating those of the classroom community" (p. 133). This is precisely what HSRA's four philosophies of Family, Community, Respect and Education express and achieve. Parker Palmer (1983, 1993) supports the idea of love as a means towards partnered relationships in community. With TJ's freedom to love, he was driven to do be constructive in his community. In my time at HSRA, I came to see love as the source from which all philosophies grow. It forms and roots them.

Love as a Root

Love is present and observable throughout the entire staff. They love their life's work (otherwise known as their jobs) because of the care they feel for the students they serve. Loving the students is their most important contribution to student success. To give an example of how this was displayed within the school community, Niles identifies what he appreciates about the students:

> . . . their intelligence and their ideas, they have some excellent ideas. . . . They're just very intelligent. It's just about sitting down and opening up and listening to them, then it all comes out . . . but the thing is, society really gravitates towards deception and negativity, you know, and finger pointing. But I see greatness, that's all I see. (Niles, June, 4th)

I interpret Niles' appreciation for students' intelligence, ideas, and greatness as a manifestation of love. He is not simply caring about a student when he recognizes someone's greatness. However, he acknowledges a valid point that often goes unheeded: Society often focuses on the negativity and deception associated with Black youth, silencing their creative and productive possibilities.

As I talk with Tommy, he reflects on his 10 years with the school and states, "I can't imagine not coming back (to the school). It all goes back to seeing a young person's life change right before your eyes" (June, 4th). Tommy did not say outright at this point that he loved his students, but his language conveyed gratitude for the student body and acknowledgment that the school helps change the lives of young people by focusing on possibilities, not faults. Peter, also, says that the love for his work stems from the students:

> It's the music, it's the students, it's their creativity, it's their music, it's their brilliant ability to write lyrics and compose and the desire to learn and that, I revisit every day and never get tired of it. (June 5th)

I think that this love for students is the backbone, the crux, the stronghold of the school's philosophies, and would like to give an example of how it was displayed during a weekly community meeting, where staff and students voluntarily participate in an open forum to discuss topics of their choice. As the topic of discipline and academic expectations in conjunction with student/teacher relationships came around, Ms. Chi, (The Director of the Health and Sexuality Program) states, "It's always with *love* underneath . . . it's always with concern. Your well-being is very important to me. That's *why* I'm here . . . " (Observation, May 28th). This commitment to students' well-being grounded the school's four philosophies, creating a space for possibility and empowerment for African American youth.

TJ's improvised speech during graduation reiterates this as he stands off to the right of the stage in the crowd. His presence commands the room. This confident, bass-voiced man of about 5'11" has no pretense in his off-white-and-beige sweat suit. He holds the microphone and no script, faces the students and crowd, and booms:

> You're important and very successful, and you have an opportunity to move forward and do something productive with your life . . . you know it's really special. . . . I know I'm the founder, but I know I'm a steward . . . making sure that this place is here to protect you. I just wanted to tell everybody that I'm really glad that the foundation of what I built this school from was my personal true confessions. (TJ, Graduation, June 2013)

The a-typical graduation speech then streams right into his poem (rap), "True Confessions." His low, raspy voice reverberates with the rhythmic flow as he steadies the room. His arms sway as he captures the people.

(Rap) This is about the true confession
If you listen close you're about to learn a lesson
You must know failure before success
This is the failure I must confess.
I was . . . on the street trying to deal with this

playing the games almost got dismissed
Cocaine was the thing that I took on
And nowhere was the place that I was goin'
Now I must tell the truth, I cannot lie,
I was heading for the kill, steal, destroy and die
From the top to the bottom, the bottom to top
Success is where I'm heading there ain't no doubt
Success is something that we all want
But the truth is what you need to reach that place
The truth is something that you can't deny
Your only defense is to tell a lie
I had to give this message the stone cold truth
I hope there's something in it that's there for you
Like I told you before, I'll tell you again
Success is something that's deep within
So remember the truth, you can't go wrong
The flesh is weak but the spirit is strong
I had to do this rap but I know it's right,
Cause I did it in the name of Jesus Christ
(TJ, taken from graduation ceremony)

The crowd responds with a loving round of glissando "whoop whoops!" I smile, clap, and reflect reverently on my stay here and the deep commitment to students' well-being, protection, and creativity. This, I am sure, is manifested as an act of love.

A Life Changer

Love can also be interpreted through acts of care and concern. Because over 80% of the student body has either been expelled from their previous schools or have dropped out of school at one point, many of the students identified the school as a "life changer" (Cassey, Cashious), or as "a lifesaver built from the ground up." (DY). Or as a "last chance" (Lauren, Jay D), or, as Deez put it:

> The last option . . . it's not meant in a bad way, it's more like this school is made for you to succeed . . . this is a program for drop-out students and students who have hard times in traditional high school, and of course it is for musicians, as well. (June 8th)

Instead of dropping out, student engagement was also thought of as "another chance," or a "life changer," as Cashious puts it:

> This school is the home of the six chances. Because they just keep letting you come back and re-accepting you. This program does a lot of great things for people. It changes lives. It might sound cliché, but it actually does . . . so this program to me, I would explain it as, a life changer. (June 5th)

He continues, "HSRA is a program for dropout students and students who have hard times in traditional high schools. And, of course, it is for musicians, as well."

Autumn redefines the school as she says enthusiastically, "This school is legit. It's *so* much better than every other traditional school from my point of view and preference, 'cause I epically failed in traditional school." I did not lead with any question or comment in relation to traditional schools, I did not prompt language around greatness or how it might change a life, and I did not ask about failure versus success. I simply asked the student to describe the school for me. They chose greatness.

Cassey is an 18-year-old student whom the social worker recommended that I interview. Her story is multi-layered. She talks lovingly about her family, mom, brothers, and sisters, and how she was previously homeless by herself, but is currently living on her own in a subsidized housing unit for previously homeless teens. A couple of days earlier, I drove her home and was privileged to see a medium-sized, light-blue, older, lumber house of the 1940's era, located in a quaint neighborhood. The lawns were tidy, and the houses were maintained in a way that reminded me of my middle-class childhood. As we drove, Cassey spoke like a teen who was striving for more and planning responsibly for it, cognizant of her situation.

I try to get to know her a bit, and ask her what musical artists she listens to at home. She replies, "I don't own any speakers. I have no speakers in the house to listen to.

I need to get some, though." She continues, "But there are a lot of expenses coming up." Then she talks about how prom might not be an option this year because if she went to prom, she would still need to "get a dress, get my hair done, my nails done, and pay for the tickets still. But last year one of my teachers paid for my prom ticket. But…" she pauses, as if she's not able to predict the future.

This informal experience provided background information for her official interview with me days later. During the interview, I am curious to learn about her previous school experiences. She tells me that she kept getting suspended from her previous school and that she hated the education: "They weren't really teaching you [any]thing since it was a military school . . . so I got suspended two times." She continues:

> I never wanted to be in class . . . and like, the [teachers] just put the answers on the board and say 'copy, write this down', and the class would be done. It's like I don't know, they'[re] not focused on teaching the students. (Cassey, June 9th)

When she considered dropping out, her mother finally allowed her to come to HSRA. Now, she claims, "I love this school . . . it literally changed my life." She exudes gratefulness for the school, especially for the two social workers, "'Cause this guy, right here, in this office, he helped me get into the place that I am, 'cause when I first came to this school in ninth grade, I was homeless." "By yourself?" I ask. "By myself. Because I didn't want to live with my mom. I was having so many problems living with my mom. . . . " Cassey's homelessness and contempt for her previous school tempted her to drop out, she says. But the most impactful story to me is Cassey's deep appreciation for HSRA and the role it plays in her life. It meets a need greater than any particular method: it provides a place of love and security by "changing" lives. For others, it provides a

creative educational environment where they were previously “epically failing.” It also provides a place called home.

Stories

I have discussed the school’s physical space and have provided some teaching and learning examples. I have discussed historical injustices that are embedded within the student body, and. through acknowledging this I have shown how love for these students is the root from which the four other philosophies grow. I now begin to emphasize autobiographical stories that serve a couple of purposes. First, Peter (the sound engineering teacher) emphasizes that students “they want to be heard. It’s the fundamental thing we as human beings want. We want to be heard, understood, listened too, appreciated, praised, you know? Am I doing good?” (Interview, June 4th). Second, the stories serve as a reminder to educators that students’ lives can be “complicated and very real” (TJ, June 5th), and often stem from historical inequities that continue to manifest in their lives. Third, these stories remind educators that most students want to do well and be engaged in their education, even when their life circumstances are challenging.

These intimate stories of students and faculty are not included to re-affirm stereotypes, but to serve educators as a way to re-think stereotypes of students who are often misunderstood, ignored, or invisible to much of society (hooks, 1992, pg. 26). I am also attempting to contribute to sociological literature on the “manifestations of racism and their consequences for ethnic minorities (Spencer, et.al, 2001, p. 24). But more

specifically, I hope to contribute to literature of success rather than deficit (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986).

For this reason, the students' stories will be presented with in the light of four major "obstacles" they face (Tommy, June, 4th; Autumn, June 6th; TJ, June 5th). These are to be found under the umbrella of the historical undermining of resource allocation, otherwise known as poverty. They are identified as (a) homelessness, (b) multiple relocations, (c) experiences with dropping out of school, and (d) incarceration. Aligning poverty with these four lived experiences is not new (Defina & Hannon, 2013). However, like the school, I will focus on *possibilities* rather than deficits.

Obstacles

As I wrestle with the implications of using the term "obstacles" to describe experiences of some students, I become uncomfortable. I realize that focusing on obstacles can deter one from thinking about possibilities. Yet, I see students and faculty also wrestle with this as they are forced to acknowledge obstacles in order to take them on. For this reason I begin with an example from the focus group where the obstacles that students face are openly discussed. During the group, Autumn and Cashious exhibit a deep affection for a song titled, *Maat.* Their affection is partially due to their contribution towards the lyrics and production, but also because they appreciate the meaning of the lyrics. Autumn says, "Man, that needs to be the school song. It was mainly about oppression and how we, as young African American people, are still affected by it, and how we have…Oh, I'm just going to rap it."

> Intro:
> The systems trying to take me / the systems trying to break me, they're trying to take my kids, and all my next of kin. I'm going in/I'm going in / Maat / Maat, the battles about to begin / Maat / Maat
>
> Verse:
> I am speaking for every one of my brothers and my sisters in the struggle that made nothing into something I know / _____ be hard some things may pull you down but please can you just smile it seems / that w_____ trapped for a while / My people must be for____ being physically but mentally bound, I'm trying to go far / they having my black.....evolve in to a revolution never will you harm us / aiming to alarm ya.

Autumn then moves into singing the chorus:

> Chorus:
> The chains and whips—all that hate made us stronger / all that pain that was forced on my ancestors / We're stronger than ever, we're stronger than ever / You can't break me, we're stronger than ever.

Cashious enters without missing a beat:

> I said lost in a world my morals stranded, was raised without a father statistically I'm damaged, but he the reason why I'm inspired, I hustle and meet desires, plus my momma got fired. Everybody laid off, there car no they paid off, plus them three kids cost you still hold your head like a boss, work hard now later it will pay off.

The focus group members clap, but Autumn tries to convince me that "you gotta hear the music," as if it wasn't good enough. I pay it no mind because I'm too busy considering how freedom of expression and lyrical production concerning historical inequities are rarely addressed in schools. I witness the collaboration of production and critical consciousness, and see that students are cognizant of oppressive systems: "We, as young African American people, are still affected by it" (Autumn). Obstacles created by poverty manifest themselves through a large homeless student body.

A Place Called Home

> I think one of my biggest heartbreak is the homelessness and the poverty that I see, and the young people who try, or are dealing with it. They're very resilient and at the same time, a lot of them don't have the coping skills, they come to school, they're hungry, they might be angry about something, they might be in a whole other place. (TJ, June 5th)

I begin to fully grasp that this particular African American student body is affected by the history of poverty. One of the most prevalent manifestations of this economic inequity is the number of homeless youth enrolled in the school: over a third of the students are officially homeless. The educational impact is apparent to the Director of the School, Tommy:

> A largest obstacle is the loss of hope that so many of our kids have when they first come here. You know, when you work in communities where kids don't really have to worry about where they're going to sleep that night . . . it's such of a different type of environment to deliver education. (Tommy, May 24th)

Education for the homeless requires unique approaches to ensure student engagement and progress. HSRA acknowledges the "loss of hope" that can accompany homelessness, and for this reason, they have developed support for the student body. One avenue of this support was apparent as I witnessed students openly discussing their hardships during a weekly *community meeting*. This meeting is a voluntary time that all members of the school are invited into the multi-functional cafeteria. I happen upon a community meeting and I see teachers immersed among the students. This week, student attendance is low because final projects are due, students are packing for a field trip to Hawaii, a basketball game with a neighboring school is taking place, a presentation to the State Department of Education is happening today, and students have state testing for college placement exams. Nevertheless, a small group of about 15 students, teachers, and

support staff are assembled, sitting at the lunch tables in a circle. A young man with a quiet demeanor takes the microphone and begins: “I know that not a lot of people know me yet because when I am at school, I stick to myself.” Donny (the Teacher) responds, “What’s your name?” “Daniel,” he replies. “So I’m struggling big time.” He continues:

> I was in a homeless shelter for about seven months, and Niles, [a teacher], you know, I had so many excuses, but Niles and Dave, they pushed me to come to school. You know? What’s more important? And right now, I’ve been coming to the school now for like a month and a half straight. [Claps] And you know I’m on the streets right now. Been out there for like 10 days, but I’m still coming to school every day.
>
> Donny: You’re in streets or you in a shelter?
>
> Donald: Streets.
>
> Donny: Where do you sleep?
>
> Donald: Wherever I got. And this time it’s not only me. It’s me and my girlfriend and my other friend.
>
> Donny: Where did you sleep last night?
>
> Donald: We got a hotel.
>
> Donny: But you never know from night to night, do you?
>
> Donald: No.
>
> Donny: But you still make it here.
>
> Donald: Um-hum.
>
> Donny: We wish that we could do something about it. That’s what *we* struggle with. We wish that we had a place for everybody to be safe at night and eat. That tears us apart. You know. I wish I could say, “Hey man, I got a place for you right now,” but I can’t do that. I can’t do that, and that’s messed up. But TJ, he plans on building a place near the new school. It may be a little bit of time but, ‘cause he cares, he’s doing what he can. It might not be for you, you might be done, but we’re working on, were working on it.

I've rarely seen such an inclusive space—a time dedicated to the expression, sharing, and discussion of obstacles, in a polite and honest way, especially at the high school level. I think about bell hooks' chapter in *Teaching Community* (2003), where democratic educators, "value working for the good of the community…forging a learning community that values wholeness . . . work[ing] to create closeness" (p. 49).

Then, in walks Lauren, who I've been told I need to meet because she has a great story to tell. I get a chance to learn a portion of it when she begins to give Donald some advice:

> So, I was outside working and I heard about the homeless situation. I'm here to tell you that, my mom kicked me out when I was 16 for being gay. It's been three years now, because she felt like I was leading a bad example to my brother and sister . . . to this day, she thinks it's still a phase. Um, I've been going out with girls for about seven years now so, I don't understand, but she kicked me out. And people I started going out with, I was dependent on them for houses. What happens is that they feel like they can treat you however they want to because you have to depend on them. So that leads to your own cycle of domestic, you know. But then I left, and there would be times like I wouldn't even sleep at a house, I'd just ride city buses until it was time till they stop running. Or get on the bus 16 and stay on the 16 until it took me to work and then I'd go to school from there. Um . . . right now I stay at a local shelter . . . they really help you with jobs, 'cause remember when I got a job at Taco Bell. I also just got a job at this local trucking company, so I start sometime next week. You know, a lot of things gonna bring you down, but at the end of the day it's up to you to make something negative into something positive. Because, why let someone, or anything, or anyone have the effect of you being down? You can show them that because of your circumstances you got better, and you are better, you are better than what is put in front of you. You know?

Once again, people clap in support of their classmate, and I am determined to hear more about her story later. Then Ms. Chi, the Director of the HAAS Program (which is a welcoming area on the second floor with couches, microwaves, refrigerators, TV and comfort that provides periodic shelter, wellness and sexual health classes), she remains seated next to me and reiterates:

> There are those of you here that have situations and I don't know all the situations, but, I'm also here for you too. Just so you know. There's a lot of nights that I stay here in this building. . . . So for those of you who are in those situations where you don't have anywhere to go sometimes, let me know! Because you might not realize it, but there might already be three to four of you kids already staying here. So, we gotta blow up a bed. There's a refrigerator up there and I'm not saying *all* the time, but a *lot* of the times, we're able to help. But I can't read your minds, so if I don't know your situation, and if you haven't talked to me or somebody on my staff, let us know.

At this point, I begin to understand the unique nature of this school. It is rare to witness such an open, communicative, honest, encouraging environment that periodically houses students for a night. Another young man stands up and speaks in support of Donald:

> Yeah, I just want to encourage you, because a couple years back, I was in a similar situation. I was sleeping on the streets, homeless, trying to survive, and Ms. Chi offered me the same thing, but I never took it. I never asked for help, so it took me a long time to get it together. So, I say: Whatever Ms. Chi is offering, don't be afraid to ask for it.

Classmates clap in unison, and the Dean of Students, Devon, a 270-pound ex-pro-football player, takes the microphone: "You know my heart is still ripped—torn wide open thinking about your situation. How old are you?" "Twenty," the boy responds. Devon continues:

> I just think about the times where I was in high school, and my only responsibility was to play football and be an athlete. I never had to worry about a place to stay before. I was getting my education, you know. I am extremely proud of you kids at the school, because you have a fight I don't think I could ever do. You know, being homeless. Something I've never had to think about before and I just want let you know [he tears up, his voice trembles, and he wipes his eyes as he continues] if you need anything, you can come to me.

I notice that the community philosophy of the school is displayed through an immeasurable amount of social and physical support, consistent with hooks'(2003) criteria of a democratic setting where students and teachers see "value (in) working for

the good of the community" (p. 49). I also observe a deep commitment and care for the student body.

Toward the end of my visit, it became clear that HSRA not only created a supportive environment for its school community—they also developed community-based, critically conscious productive artists. Shifting gears for a moment to consider how the teachers promote community and critical consciousness in artistic expression, during my interview with Donny, the Special Education Teacher, who also teaches the Urban Music class, he shared with me a song that the students produced in the class. Their assignment was to interview students or local homeless people to understand what it is like to be homeless. "So we interviewed one of our students, 'cause usually we have a third of our population here as homeless." He continued:

> So they asked her, "What do you want? What kind of place do you want to go to when you're homeless, and what do you worry about?" And you know, she said, "I just want to go to a place like home," and then she talked about how when some kids are worrying about homework, she's worrying about where she's going to live that night, where's she's going to stay. She doesn't want to get in a fight that night with anybody who is helping her, because then she'll be homeless again. So all this information was taken and put into a song.

He continues, "Are you ready?" and waits for my answer, "Yep." I respond and he pushes play. A soft beat accompanies a female voice:

> Chorus: A Place Like Home, A place like home: (repeats six times)
>
> Verse 1: [1st male] Eh, yeah. Hey look. A place like home where I want to be, praying to God hoping I'll soon be on my feet. Lord, I believe that to be with you, that you got me the right way you tell me what to do. I want enough strength to get away from the streets because I think that it's killin' me . . . overwhelming me. . . . Lord I need you to heal me [a slower beat] tired of all this pain that's held inside, that's happened in my life.Thankfully taking me . . . day and night. Forcing me. . . . Wrong, 'cause doing right . . . a place like home that'll change my life.
>
> Chorus [overlap lyrics]

> Voice 1: A place like home, I'll take it, though. I'm all alone in this world with no place to go.
>
> Voice 2: A Place Like Home: Repeat
>
> Verse 2 [1st female singer] I started my life with somebody that cared, now I'm older, there's nobody here. Where is the person that loved me as a baby, if they really cared, why am I living like crazy? I'm not looking for someone to blame, but I don't want to feel this pain, 'cause street life is getting harder walking round needing a father.
>
> Chorus [overlap lyrics]

As the song continues a few more verses, I recognize that, through these lyrics, students express their experiences with homelessness, friendships, family, a desire for their education, and a desire to "get back on their feet." The notion of "good" (Hatch, 2009) that I wish to focus on here is that the school's philosophies of Family, Community, and Education are able to flourish and become lived practice. This practice is seen through a displayed love of the people present, creating a space of inclusive acceptance, and encouraging critical consciousness of lived experiences; altogether, and in conjunction with the creative aspect of the school, this creates a space for productive possibilities.

Relocations

Although poverty has been identified as the largest obstacle that relates to the rather extensive homeless population, I would also like to call attention to how multiple relocations affect students' education. This student body identifies itself as having moved around "a lot" (DY, Autumn, Jay D, Cashious, Denzel, Miles Interviews). During his interview, Miles describes how his mom packed up the whole family one day, got in the car with no real destination, and moved.

During an informal talk with Miles' mom at the prom, we sit alone at a table, getting to know each other. She laughs about not wanting to be in Miles' space too much, so she is trying to "keep her distance." We sit in a restaurant that slowly rotates, allowing for a 360-degree view of the city, which makes a nice conversation breaker. After sharing some chocolate-covered strawberries and a brownie or two together, Miles' mom begins to tell me about their relocation process, that she was just getting away from Chicago and everything about it. She speaks about her over commitment to her family and church, and about familial gang affiliations, which led to her impromptu departure. She packed up the car and children, and had no idea where she was heading. "Wow, brave," I say to myself,

Moving out of Chicago was brought up a great deal in the focus group (Focus group, June 4th). While we sit in a circle, right before lunch, I offer these six students a mix of healthy and unhealthy snacks. Licorice hangs out of some mouths, while the smell of oranges fills the room. We touch on the topic of moving around a lot, and Jay D tells a story that is similar to Miles':

> I moved from Chicago, I left Chicago, 'cause I wanted to get away from all the gang stuff that was going on. And, I rose from all of that . . . I lived in Chicago for about six years when I was younger. But then I moved 'cause of some deaths and stuff happened. When I came down here, it was so hard for my family because we didn't have any family here at first. It was just us . . . my five other siblings and my mom. It was just us at first. It was terrible because it was a new start, we didn't know anybody.

The comment is multi-faceted. It touches on the effects of crime on the students' lives and the hardship that comes from starting a new life. It leads the group to talk about a difference between Chicago and their current city, like when a tornado "hurled through" and the "lights went out." Cashious leads the conversation in his elevated Atlanta drawl, elongated vowels, and animated body movements:

> Yeah, in the north side, people were killing each other, but the thing about the north side—they talk about Chicago, right? Everybody just wrapped around trying to be just like Chicago. But when people were dying up in here it looked crazy as hell, because it's about six million people in Chicago, right?"

JD answers "About nine." But Cashious makes it clear, "It's about nine million, but I'm just talking about the Black people!" The room shakes with laughter and a few students clap, sharing his sentiment. He continues, "And it's 500 murders a year [in Chicago]. That's not that much. Well, that's a lot, but if we get 90 murders here, that's like skyrocketing!" They all agree and DY continues: "I'm from here, but I used to live in Chicago for three years, then I moved back to Florida again, then I used to live in St. Louis and Kansas City, Atlanta and Iowa."

I almost said, "I know, I moved around a lot, too!" But I remain silent because I know the difference between moving around a lot as a government baby (as people have called me because my father worked for a government agency), compared to moving around a lot due to social constructions of inequity and institutionalized racism. I came from social, economic, and racial privilege. So I remain silent. They remain on this topic of Chicago and bring up a song they wrote in the Urban Music Class, titled, "I Miss the Projects." They don't go into great detail about it, but they allude to the fact that they are proud of it.

Donny, too, brings up this song during his interview. As he and I sit in the same room at a later date (Donny, June 6th), his interview is slightly different from the others. His interview is guided by his playlist on his computer, and he shares the plethora of songs produced in his *Urban Music* class. As he comes across "I Miss the Projects," he eagerly shares:

> Oh, here's one I really like, we made a video of it too. It's talking about gentrification and it's called *I Miss the Projects.* You know, they knocked down the projects in Chicago, and even though you know the projects weren't the best, it was still their home when they were growing up, and it's their memory. They make a lot of references to the Chicago project.

He asks again, "Are you ready?" I reply, "Yep," He pushes play and the soothing bass-ridden beat begins::

> Chorus:
> I miss the projects, I miss the projects
> It was my home / I left and came back now it's gone,
> What am I goin' to do? / What am I goin' to do?
> It's good and bad things happen that made everybody keep on packin'
> You'all, just don't know / You'all just don't know.
>
> Verse:
> They say this is the land of Americans/but they don't treat us like we are Americans
> They lie to us, steal from us huh/they say they tore them down cause we were killing ourselves / but really, listen
> It was the downtown area / we was too deep down there and they thought we were deadly so they gave us section 8 and then they moved us away……
> but yeah / I miss the projects.

This song displays how students are critically analyzing their lived situations and questioning the norms of inequality. They also acknowledge that these social inequities begin to feel normal, because it is what they are used to. I think of Douglas Massy and Nancy Denton's (1993) book *American Apartheid* when they state, "The maintenance of a rigid color line in hosing through violence and institutionalized discrimination paradoxically also created the conditions for ghetto expansion." (p. 37). Years later, it also created opportunity for gentrification, yet another form of displacement. I continue to wonder if this is part of the reason for their previous disengagement with school?

Previously Disengaged

Expulsion from school often leads to a student wanting to drop out (Skiba, 2014). Specifically in relation to HSRA'S history of attracting students who had previously dropped out of school, State Farm recruited three students from HSRA to become: *26 Second Ambassadors—national spokespeople for the campaign.* 26 Seconds is taken from a statistic that every 26 seconds a student drops out of school. State Farm interviewed three students about their previous drop out experience, creating on-line interviews that were designed to "raise awareness about the concerns of high school dropouts" (retrieved from http://www.youtube.com/watch? v=l4icpLd8SCw). A number of other students also contributed to the project by writing songs and producing the final CD while others designed logos for clothing, jewelry, and other artifacts. State Farm eventually funded the participants to go on national tour performing in High Schools across the Midwest and West Coast. I speak to two 26 Seconds Ambassadors still attending the school, and they are rightly proud of their contribution. DY, one of them, sits with me during an interview (June 8th), passionate to share the struggles he underwent in his previous schools:

> I had eventually dropped out of high school. . . . I have attended five different high schools in three different states [in suburban and urban settings]. Moving out to Milwaukee [from the suburbs] made me a lot more appreciative of the little things in life. [Milwaukee is] where I started writing poetry and raps and really getting in with who I really was. And when I had moved back from Milwaukee, I don't know why, but they thought they'd throw me back in to the same suburban high school. Oh man, it was worse, because I lived in the polar opposites of what the suburbs was. So I was getting into fights, skipping school a lot. I had eventually dropped out of high school and I got kicked out of my house. And I moved around a lot. I didn't know where I was going to sleep. A lot of the times I would just come up with something at the last minute. Something would come up at the last minute and they'd be like, "Hey do you need a place to crash?" Somebody was looking over me or something, but it ended up getting pretty bad. It came to a point where I didn't have anywhere to sleep. I was sick of moving

> literally from north to south, just all around, everywhere, every night, trying to figure out where to sleep. Like literally 16 years old, in survival mode. No job, no nothing, hustling trying to get a dollar to eat. It came to a point where I couldn't take it anymore. I had attempted suicide and finally hit rock bottom. I woke up in the hospital and they put me in a program.

DY touches on a multitude of topics. He correlates his experience with moving from city to city, to suburb, and back again to how these experiences affected his preference of an educational setting. He also acknowledges that negative racial experiences in a suburban school affected his educational engagement, and ultimately his happiness. Likewise, he correlates how poverty and homelessness affected his school engagement.

> This school is a lifesaver built from the ground up. Because if you look back at the history [of HSRA], it just started out as a studio, that TJ had a lot of kids that should have been in high school come into his studio. And it's also a blessing because . . . it's really great that he would make a school like this . . . it's not like traditional high schools . . . and if it weren't for this school, I wouldn't be graduating.

DY clearly expresses his need and desire for an education, a sense of belonging, and a school that contributes to an eventual goal of graduation. This resembles a report by Civic Enterprises, titled *The Silent Epidemic* (2006). They found that most previous dropout students wished they had not dropped out or had found a school that would re-enroll them age-appropriately. Many other students said that graduation was a major goal for them, and understood how their past histories have affected their goals.

I witness a similar situation during the focus group (June 4th). Six students and I sit in a circle, and Autumn talks about graduation: "Yeah, a lot of people come here and they're the first person in their family to graduate from high school. Like, on time, too." Everyone agrees, "Yeah, yeah." She continues, "So that's like one of my closest friends here. We're the *26-Second* Ambassadors together, and he's the first person to graduate

high school in his family, and the first person to go to college." Khristine chimes in, "Yeah, I'm trying to be the first." Then Jay D speaks up to make sure he can be heard despite the excitement in the room, and says he will be the third person in his extended family:

> to actually finish high school before [I] hit 21. Like my cousins, they didn't even finish, they went and got their GED. In my generation right now, I'm the oldest out of all my siblings, so it puts a little more pressure.

Khristine ends the conversation by saying, "Yeah, it puts a responsibility on us." And they all agree, heads nodding in silence. So even though the students do not outright talk about historical inequities, they do voice that their histories do not provide role models for educational advancement. In the year of 2014, they are the ones who are looked upon as leaders in education, not their past family members.

Students agree that the teachers at HSRA help them attain their graduation, recognizing that teacher and student relationships are important to them. Dean continues with what seems to be a heartfelt comment: "Yeah, Surah, she's the best. She's always on me to get my work done so I can graduate . . . and she makes it fun! And even though I had different things going on in my life, she would e-mail me and say 'Come back to school!" (Focus Group, June 4th). They all laugh.

During Peter's interview (June 5th), he remembers a student who specifically thanked him for his encouragement to graduate:

> I remember this time where this boy I was working with, he had previously dropped out and was having a hard time with his math and the credit system screwed up, he was getting jerked around [from his previous school] . . . he was behind in credits and while he was here, I was just trying to dig deep into the files, and it looked ugly, but somehow I just keep saying, "Dude, just stay in school."

With a laugh, he adds, “But somehow I made an impression on him, because later on, he told me, ‘You know, if it wasn’t for you, I wouldn’t have stayed in school.’” I think about how past negative experiences with education creates obstacles for students to remain motivated to graduate, and how this school creates a safe, loving space that many consider their lifesaver and home. This is also communicated by the students who had previously been incarcerated.

From Incarceration to Graduation

Current education policies implement barriers for formerly incarcerated youth to return to school, so a GED becomes a welcomed alternative (Alexander, 2010, 2012). HSRA recognizes the complications so they provide a solution to the problem—a “lifesaving” education.

In his interview, Jay D says, “I’ve been to jail four-five times already, and it was before I hit 20.” He continues,

> I was just out on the streets all the time. I was never in school, but then when I finally got my senses, I went back to school when I was like 17. Then I fell off school again . . . went to jail, got out and then when right back in. I was in and out of jail for a whole year. Then I was finally just like, you know what? And I finally had my son, and that kind of changed my life. (Jay D, interview, June 2nd)

As we sit in the focus group that Jay D participates in, he raises the importance of “setting an example,” and continues without hesitating, “Yeah, to graduate before I hit 21, also, and I’m actually pretty proud of that. ‘Cause I went to jail and that’s what screwed everything up for me. Man, that screwed everything up for me.” Dean confirms in his bass voice, “Yep. That happened to me, too” (Focus Group, June 4th).

But I return to how love for this population nurtured throughout the school’s philosophies, addresses the historically biased nature of incarceration and Black youth.

One such example was displayed as I sit with Donny, the Special Education teacher, who also teaches the *Urban Music* course. As we shift through the mass amount of songs he has created in the eight or nine years he has taught the course, he comes across the song called "Abolitionist." His interview reveals to me that there are some teachers who attempt to infuse history with music, critical thinking, multi-media projects, and creative production. I believe this is why his interview lasted the longest—for almost two hours. He had several examples of final products created during the teaching and learning process and the following example displays how students think about and critically analyze social inequities: in particular, the mass incarceration of Black America:

> OK . . . there's "Berta Berta." This is a song they sing in prison a lot. It's just an old times song, about telling their woman Berta about go on without me, I'm gonna be here for a while, you know, go with somebody who can do you good.
>
> I ask, "Are you talking about the chain gang time?"
>
> Yep, and it is the same concept, and he [the student singer] starts out talking about what he's doing in the streets, and then he gets caught. Then he's talking about how he's feeling in there and how his girl treats him afterwards.
>
> I ask, "So how did you set up the lesson?"
>
> Well, we were talking about the prison industrial complex and we were trying to hit it from every angle. And with "Berta Berta," we studied the past and what was happening and just brought it up to what was happening to this day.
>
> I continue, "How did you study the past?"
>
> Just through articles and a lot of YouTube. We would look up chain-gains, prison-industrial complex—then we'd take a concept out of there and we would look at chain-gains and prison and what was happening back in the day, you know, and just discuss that. I also asked, 'How many of you have been arrested?' And a lot of them raised their hands. 'Now, how many of you been in jail for a while?' They all raised their hands. We wanted to do a song about it, but this time, do a song like *Berta Berta*. You know a girlfriend, and there's some kind of conflict there. And so this is what he came up with… Ready? (Interview, June 6th)

"Yep," I reply, and I hear the sound of chains, trains, and men singing in the old chain-gang style. It illustrates how critically conscious educators advocate for a critically conscious Black youth education. I think of many educators who incorporate critical consciousness into the context of African American history, and I wonder how often critical consciousness and creative production are ever seen in music programs across the nation. Can a conscious, and creative music education create avenues for students to reflect on the social inequities that continue to affect their lives? TJ realizes that students are still affected by them, by telling me, "Over 75% of our students have been incarcerated, and it drops to something like only 20% after graduation" (TJ, June 5th). This is confirmed by Dr. Sherrise Truesdale (2005), who found that, on average, 67% of students from HSRA were formally involved in the criminal justice system, and that the number declines to 11% after graduation. I presume that the reasons for such a decline are complex, and I do claim to have identified every possibility. But the students agree that one of a main goals is, "They [teachers] really keep my attention on graduating. That's their main focus" (DJ, June, 2nd).

Whether one considers serving youth who have been incarcerated, homeless teens, or previous dropouts, HSRA demonstrates the validity of TJ's original idea to create a space that re-engages African American students in their educational process. The *means* that are utilized to encourage student engagement and successes will be discussed in future chapters. But for the present, the interconnections between school, students, and policy that affect student engagement and learning are summed up by Tommy (June 5th):

> We work with such a unique population here that there's a lot of politics with it. And especially for us when we are working with young people who have

> already been turned off from traditional education, and they have various challenges in their lives in addition to what has happened to them educationally.

This highlights a need to examine untraditional programs that successfully implement unconventional notions of success.

Chapter V

AN OPEN CANVAS:

CURRICULUM, PEDAGOGY, AND GRADUATION

> When you have to first help a young person value education way before you can begin to deliver it to them, it's a whole other process you're taking that person through. Because in the end, what you realize the most, it's not even about valuing education first—it's really first valuing themselves. (Tommy, May 24th)

Tommy's quote and my own reflections on the schools' space and characters bring me to consider how its unconventional teaching, pedagogy, and curricula contribute to this process where students, first and foremost, learn to value themselves.

Space and the Politics of Silencing

When James Baldwin and Margaret Mead began their conversation, *Rap on Race* (1971), they confronted issues around race and education. As Baldwin wrote, "By teaching a black child that he is worthless, that he can never contribute anything to civilization, you're teaching him how to hate his mother, his father, and his brothers" (p. 11)—and, I add, to hate him or herself. TJ, the school's founder, recognized the systemic practices that alienate African American males and often deny them a space to explore, create, and mature their voices, so he created a school with structure, curriculum, and pedagogy that defy such institutionalized, racially bound practices. Tommy, TJ's counter-partner, reinforces this when he identifies that the silencing of "self" often leads to a devaluing of education. I begin to see a theme emerging, one that concerns space.

Both a physical space to create, such as in a home, an environment, a school, a classroom—affording students a space to create of their selves—not silencing. And an inner space of being where reflection, creativity, changing, and individuality co-exits with a space to explore**.** A person who is denied such a space will battle identities. An identity of hope is de-synchronized with an identity of one's own potential—recognizing that one's own inner strengths are separated from space of possibilities. I refer to bell hooks (1994) below:

> This undermines a pedagogy that seeks constantly to affirm the value of student voices. It suggests a democratic process by which we erase words, and their capacity to influence and affirm. With that erasure Suzie is not able to see herself as a speaking subject worthy of voice. I don't mean only in terms of how she names her personal experience, but how she interrogates both the experience of others, and how she responds to knowledge present. (p. 149)

HRAS's leaders recognize this, so they remind policymakers that their students are worthy of recognition. They are a voice that matters, a voice of change, a voice of reflection, a voice of experience, and a voice of community that grows and changes as they learn and become. As policies continue to promote exclusion, conformity, and silence, through culturally biased curricula, standardized testing, and standardized school structures, Christopher Warren (2012) wrote: "non-white children continue to bear the brunt of racial trauma through educational inequality, institutional racism through Eurocentric curriculum and pedagogy, and race-based teacher bias" (p. 198). Recognizing this, HRSA is left to advocate for a unique approach to education: "a whole other process taking that person through." They try to provide a way for students to become re-engaged and recognize their strengths, their weaknesses, and their propensity for engagement and action. This chapter, therefore, explores the teaching, pedagogy, and

curricula that HSRA staff use as a means to engage students and encourage them to develop their voice, their creativity, and their capacity to flourish.

Troubling the Standard Idea of Success

This chapter challenges the politics of *success* and instead questions the *process* of success, one that ultimately leads students to graduation. I question if success can be qualified outside of the norm of standardized testing—and, specifically for music education, outside of state and national rankings? And if it can, what do alternatives look and sound like? Can success be determined by what *students* find valuable in a learning environment? Can success be re-conceptualized relative to where students are at, at the present time? Not just because Black students are doing something is this considered success, because a pre-conceived limitation of individual potential is implied in this thought, instead rethinking success is considered.

For example, I begin with Tommy. We sit in a small windowless room still buzzing with activity as cell phones ring, and both students and teachers knock on the door looking for one thing or another. Tommy leans back in the chair, legs crossed at his knee and ankle, and he talks adamantly about providing a place of engagement, or "a solution" for the students. He focuses on their potentials regardless of past histories:

> We tell the story of who our kids are, their demographics, but we only do that as a matter of necessity 'cause we get so much push back. We have to remind people of who they are, it's not like we try to make anybody feel sorry for us or who our kids are. What we really want to do, we wish we didn't have to do that at all, and all we did was show how great our students are and how capable they are to produce great work. (May 24th)

HSRA challenges conformist ideas of success: that *learning* is linked to quantifiable benchmarks. Even though students are producing "great works," current

policies in education continue to pressure innovative learning environments, especially for African American students. Donny, the Special Education teacher, talks about how policy, education, and race interconnect:

> The system is so political you can't really do anything, especially if you're not in a school like this. You start a program, and you're helping kids and the next thing you know they cut the program 'cause of money . . . you can only do so much . . . you need to get in a school like this. And then once this school starts getting really going . . . it may be crushed. You know, they crushed the one school they said was a Muslim school, getting the best test scores in the state, but then they said they were teaching religion. But they were the best students in the state and they closed the school down. So people weren't comfortable with them doing so well. And would people be comfortable with, you know, when young Black kids start getting the top scores in the state, as a group? No, they won't be comfortable offering students a place for them to go, and still receive an education, and try to do some kind of reforming. (June 9th)

"A school like this" means a non-traditional school, catering to a demographic that appreciates structure, teaching, and curricula that offer choice, options, creativity, and flexibility.

Likewise, Tommy reiterates this point as he tells me that a "quality education for non-traditional students . . . " has caused HSRA to implement un-standardized means that foster student success, with special attention to meeting students' needs, "where they were, at that time" (May 24th). TJ and Tommy are like-minded in their educational mission: TJ speaks of his students, their intelligence, creativity, honesty, and wisdom, while contrasting this depiction with how educational policy often ignores and challenges their potential. The wealth of experience he has acquired as a mentor, father, teacher, and leader to these young people enable him to offer insight. He leans forward, his elbows bent deep across the round table; his cell phone is off to the side as he multi-tasks his business and our interview. Nevertheless, he is fully attentive as he tells me:

> The traditional educational system needs to understand and not just give up on these kids, because I think a lot of them are really just thrown away. People just can't relate or they don't understand. They think because they have a nice building to come to and a pencil and pen, that [snap's fingers], 'OK, now you're going to learn.' Well, if you don't understand the back-story and the challenges that they have in the street and at home, you're not going to get it and you're going to think that this young person is just belligerent, and they don't care. But that's not the case. I know that if the student has an opportunity to do something positive and get a hold of an opportunity, 99% of the time, they'll choose it. They'll take the positive route. (June 5th)

TJ believes that current policies eliminate or ignore alternative paths to *success*, especially for students who are often just "thrown away," especially because "99% of the time" students will choose opportunities and spaces to create, and defy the "belligerent" stereotype often associated with African American students. He ends by saying, "It's not about what you get on a test score. . . . It's really about, are you prepared to be a life-long learner?" For this reason, HSRA staff implements various *means* to educate and create "life-long learners." The following section will discuss what I view as important means that are intended to nurture student learning and engagement and success: (1) the structural design of the school, (2) its teaching and pedagogy, and (3) its curricula.

Means Towards an End: An Open Canvas

In order to develop "life-long learners," the school structure, pedagogy, and curricula are created as "an open canvas" (TJ, June 5th), a space of possibilities rather than mandated means. An open canvas is a means that is valued by youth participants that foster experiences of flourishing. It ultimately leads to graduation. I envision the whip of a multi-colored paint brush randomly filling this canvas with deliberate and innovative ideas coupled with the outcome of surprise. They are filled with student-centered, participatory, creative, transformative projects—and with multi-modal, relevant, critical,

and experiential learning. The thing is, the canvas is continually in progress, because there are multiple canvases. Each new project is a new canvas, contributing to the whole. It is unfinished, passion-driven, imperfect, and motivated by interest, none of which is neat. Music educators often think of Orff and Dalcroze—or more recent, student-centered approaches such as student-led rehearsed garage bands or popular-music ensembles (Allsup, 2003, 2008) that attract and engage students. Each approach is viable and worthy of exploration, but for African American students who have been disengaged in their education, an open canvas seems like a good place to begin anew. Tommy believes that an open canvas is:

> . . . about being passion driven, recognizing [that], as an educational institution, people learn best when they see relevancy and real purpose to what they are learning. And especially for us when we are working with young people who have already been turned off from traditional education. (May 24th)

The educators in this institution believe in creating a place where students create their own learning environment, a relevant place that allows students to develop projects that are relevant to their lives and a place where collaborative and generative production thrives. The curriculum is not intended to achieve high test scores, or to achieve a high festival rating. It is about creating and initiating projects that hold students' interest.

The focus group and individual interviews reveal that students are passionate about how their learning is linked to self-initiation, choice, interest, and relevancy: an openness. Students say, "It's just real open here" (Lauren, June 3rd)—or, as Cassey says, "kids come here because they heard on the street that HSRA lets you do whatever you want. It's not like that. [They let you do] whatever you want to be successful, not so you can clown around" (June 3rd). Likewise, the talkative, informative, focus group members

clearly articulate what they appreciate about the teaching and curricula. Autumn, with her cool red Converse shoes on, a colorful hat and black fingernail polish says:

> You can run your high-school career, instead of our high-school career being told to us. Like, this is the test you take today, or this is the days of homework. *You* say pretty much, *you* have more control.

The others say, "yep," "yeah," and um-hum," as they nod and bob their heads. Autumn continues, "You have a lot of control over your own success." I wonder what they consider to be "success," but I wait to find out. She continues, "I think the fact that we get to choose what we learn about is one of the biggest factors that people are always talking about. It keeps us wanting to come back to school. . . . [We can] pick what we talk about . . . we can make a project about anything." The five students and I sit on this conversation for a while, and Autumn continues, "What really motivates the student to do well is the fact that they can do it through what they love best!" Khristine adds, "Yeah, we are encouraged to have fun in the process of learning!"

Fun learning that offers space for an individual's voice to emerge, affords the opportunity for students to value their contribution. This weaves through the core idea that students must first value themselves in order to value their education. Tommy reminds me of this once again during our interview:

> Our philosophy, then, is to really create a program that a young person can see himself or herself in as quickly as possible. We didn't design and then hope that the philosophy matched someone. We were engaged with young people who were demonstrating that passion around music, particularly music production, creating their own music and learning how to take control of their creativity. We just built on that philosophy from that experience that we were having when we were just a regular recording studio. So, at its highest, it's a passion studio-driven program that's about creativity and individualization and focusing on one kid at a time, and recognizing that each one has its own interests, challenges, and dreams. We're successful the better we are at meeting that young person, *who* they are, and *what* they're all about. (May 24th)

Tommy recognizes that success can be complex and goes far beyond simple test scores and assessments. They assess themselves according to how well they meet students *where* they are, and how well they provide a space for students to explore their interests as they become producers of knowledge. They accompany this with maintaining high expectations to reach the end goal of a high-school diploma. Success is not score-centered—it is student-centered.

I meet with DY—one of the *26 Seconds* national spokespersons for the State Farm funded *Stay in School* campaign. Today, his curly brown hair pops out from under his hat as he gives me a warm smile. His 5’ 6” lanky stature exudes strength and confidence as he tells me:

> What I love about this school is that they pinpoint things that the students like, their hobbies, their interests, then put those students in a group, and group those students together and they combine the social, the educational, the curriculum in just doing that right there. . . . They inquire about what you need to do in order to graduate high school, with things that kids really already like to do! I’ve been to five different high schools in three different states and this is the only one that has even ever made sense! . . . They do this more in college, but as high school students, especially when you get into your upperclassman years . . . this is what you need to be doing, getting ready for what you *like* to do . . . so you already have at least some knowledge for when you go into college.

The consensus is that, for the students, success is attached to their appreciation for having been offered a choice and an opportunity to express unique interests. They are able to “pinpoint things that the students like” (DY) and build upon it. The student does not come to the school as an empty vessel needing to be filled; she arrives already informed and interested in developing. This is what students attribute to remaining engaged in school. Individual voice and representation of self is valued and the means by which they gain this experience is equally valued.

Creative Expression as a Means

"Get Out the Way" (TJ, May 26th). As TJ says these words, I begin to silently sing Ludacris' song in my head, "Move . . . get out the way, get out the way. . . . " But, I quickly flash back to the present with TJ, and he repeats it as an emphasis of thought:

> Move, get out the way, because they know what they're trying to do better than me trying to guide them. . . . I've learned to be a good steward, try to provide the opportunity and resources and let them do it! If I can show them a way to the resources and what they need to do, I've become attuned to that. I need to step back . . . step back and [let them] do their thing.

Administrators and teachers get out of students' way to encourage the "Freedom to discover…and allow them to explore" (Tommy, May 24th). Once again, Tommy and TJ reinforce each other's thoughts:

> We are immersed in young people and their creativity, their interests who want to share their creativity, to record it, to market it, to understand, to be a better creative person as well as a better business person. . . . And us continuing to keep that in front of us in terms of who we are, recognizing that our young people are creative, they are enterprising. We also want them to understand some of the core learning areas that inform even the creativity . . . our job is to then make sure that we're constantly continuing to put that forward as a message, to that student, so that they easily find their place in it.

Or, as Peter states,

> It's students' creativity, their ideas, facilitating them and letting them create and discover, with feeding them as little information as possible. . . . I've learned more to be a part of their learning with them as opposed to them having to learn everything from me . . . so it's student-driven, trying to focus on paving a way for them and trying to facilitate them . . . creating an environment where they feel like they can explore and be creative. (June 6th)

I laugh to myself, thinking how often I hear this said in schools: *hardly ever*. An environment of creative exploration, where students are fed "as little information as possible," a student-driven pedagogy where the teacher simply supplies an idea and then "gets out of the way," goes against everything standardized. They reinforce to the student

that the "core learning area's even reinforce creativity." These subjects are important but are not separated from creativity, not alienated from learning. I begin to gain a deep understanding that exploring and "creative" options are infused throughout HSRA's pedagogy and learning, and I observe it over and over again. Wherever I see students working with faculty—in groups, without supervision, or solo—their work is always student-driven, with a touch of guidance from either faculty or classmates. Creative production, exploration, and learning are always readily apparent.

DY tells me that for him, learning and production can be spontaneous and student-driven, and is an essential part of his creative process. As we sit and talk, he says, "So the people here . . . socialize, they kick it off. 'Oh, you like doing that?' 'Me too'; or, 'Oh, you rap? 'Me too, let's do a song together.' There are so many things to offer" (DY, June 2nd). I see that socialization, community, students' interest, and spontaneous collaborations build from other's strengths and interests and allow "so many things" to happen. It is a communal, collaborative learning process.

For example, one day when I enter Studio 1, the lights are out and a slow, bass-ridden beat is playing. The beat has been produced earlier, I presume, because two males are adding voice tracks. Since I am new to this environment and have received a different kind of training, I am surprised to see that they are unsupervised. I haven't formally met the students, and they don't ask who I am—they just continue to work as I make myself comfortable on the arm of a chair, in the dark, watching them explore. The smaller but older one (Jay D) is in the booth, and the other (Chuck) is working the boards. The beat plays and Jay D begins: "That man, Tukki, was a gansta, he……" And his rhythm immediately goes off beat. Chuck: "Woo woo woo woo woo . . . that was garbage," he

says. Jay D: “I think I know that! I can’t hear anything in my headphones!” Chuck: “I can’t do nothin’ about that right now.” He says as he tries to figure out the problem, but eventually he says, “Bro, go get help, bro. Go get Cory, bro.” And off goes Jay D, only to return with no help.

They try to figure it out again for themselves, pushing buttons, turning buttons off, plugging things in, and eventually they are successful in getting the headphones to work. Jay D tries another take, and after a few attempts, they are satisfied. Then they switch roles. Jay D is now on the boards and he changes to a serious persona: his face washes over with focused eyes, and no jokes are told. He leans backward and forward in his chair to verify the mouse placement on the screen, he finds where this track will begin recording, he moves things to different screens, and they begin. The verse is longer, and Chuck gets far into it before it begins to go off beat. By this time, Jay D is checking his cell phone—but puts it down, says nothing, and pushes a button. The beat begins again from the beginning. This is a simple non-verbal cue that Jay D is re-recording, allowing his friend another try. Chuck completes the verse at: “It never ends!” They switch roles again. This time, Jay D adds another verse as Chuck becomes the producer. Jay D is having a hard time because he immediately goes off the beat again. He stops.

Chuck: “Did you write?!”
Jay D: “Yeah.”
Chuck: “You know you can’t freestyle!” he replies, mocking Jay D with a smile and a laugh.

I try not to laugh, too, and keep silent while Jay D makes a joke out of his own freestyle ability. Chuck starts the music again and Jay D says, “Are you recording?” Only a smile from Chuck tells Jay D that he has begun. The beat goes on and he begins:

> I can't stay here/every day's a war going inside my head / every day I think about how my baby's going to get fed / I gotta get…."

"Hey, bro . . . woo woo woo woo woo woo. If the word doesn't rhyme," directs Chuck, "Say it the same. Like, make it rhyme." In a call-and-response, they go back and forth a few times without the music, while Chuck leads, '"Every day I'm thinking *how* my baby goin' get fed.' Like that. 'Cause you're saying too much for the beat, so keep it simple." "I like that," Jay D says, with no animosity or shame. Jay D tries it, and does it differently again, "Every day I'm thinkin' how my baby's *gettin'* fed." But it works just the same. Chuck starts the beat to begin a final take, and Jay D looks at the clock. "Like, I got one minute left [of studio time]!" He tries one more time without success. Jay D laughingly screams in frustration. "Let's come back tomorrow."

I recall Tommy's words, "Why shouldn't teaching be like that?" (May 24th). Why shouldn't teaching be an open canvas that offers students the opportunity for creativity and allows them to flow though roles of teacher, student, experimenter, writer, multi-literate producer, listener, critic, encourager, and colleague? Open, experimental classrooms permit students' works in progress to become final productions, perhaps to be redone again in the future. This is no different than a pre-write, a draft, a final draft and a re-write.

One day, an impromptu, unscripted interview happens between Tommy and Damian, the videographer teacher. I've gotten a deep understanding of how the school creates space for exploration, unscripted by teachers, but I understand that sometimes products are still censored in order to assure the message is suitable for public display. Tommy says:

> For me, I don't go into the studios when they're creating, I don't go when they're just shooting, 'cause I know I have a vision, I have an opinion, and I don't want to mess it up, with their natural energy, their natural thing. But I love the after- product, after they're done, because I want to take it from good to a hit . . . now sometimes, they just keep it raw, but if we're going to release it out to the public, I want to make sure that it has that shine, that gloss.

Damien adds:

> A lot of times, I see you [Tommy] doing this, reminding us to get that message across . . . at the end of the day, Tommy is really message-driven, and asking, do we get that message across?

I realize the link between offering an open canvas that also has standards. The productions must still be acceptable for public presentation, representing the school in a way that Tommy and the staff feel appropriate. This standard of representation protects the school from state and community backlash, and assists in teaching students about self-representation—maintaining high standards for self. But maintaining these standards do not interfere with the teaching and learning in an open canvas environment. This open-canvas hands-on-learning is brought up by Tommy again, but this time, he only speaks about how privilege is often associated with hands-on, productive learning environments; and recounts a story:

> You know, I was working with [a powerful politician], and I got to know the younger kids because I worked on his presidential campaign. . . . But I remember seeing one of the nephews every day at the campaign. He was like a junior in high school or something. Every time I went there, he was there. Then I wondered, "How is he not in school? How is he here all the time"? And then someone said, "Oh well, they took him out of school this semester to work with his uncle on his campaign." I said "You can do that"?

He laughs.

> I didn't know you could just take your kid out of school. But my friend tells me, "Oh yeah. . . . " So, to me that's a good education, and it proves that if you're powerful enough and rich enough to do it that way, and have that freedom and allow that young person to explore, that tells me that there must be something to it. . . . That's what I want this to feel like . . . and it's the kind of private school

> that's like Hampshire College, where the kids run freely, figuring things out, they're making mistakes, and it's not the formal structure type. I really think that's where the real future leaders come from, and I'm thinking if we can do that for them, why not see if we can do that for our kids. Everybody thinks that for our kids, you gotta put them in uniform, you gotta keep them highly structured, you gotta take anything that relates to who they are, their humanity, their personality away . . . [the system] is less accepting of it when it's brown kids and they're poorer.

Tommy identifies that creative, exploratory, self-directed, hands-on-learning environments often go to the powered and privileged, yet are mostly eliminated from schools that serve students of color. Nevertheless, the open canvas requires some structure.

School Structure

Longer school hours, coupled with a slightly flexible attendance policy and strategic course scheduling, contribute to students' engagement at this school. Other than HSRA, reforming school structure to meet students' needs is generally ignored; the usual approach is to try to reform students so they will meet institutional demands. Tommy says that a school environment can create a space where students start to "stand tall" and begin to value themselves as learners. TJ (June, 5th) agrees with this but adds:

> They might have different things going on in their lives, it [doesn't] always put them in a real good mind-state and frame to become a good learner. So, I think one of the biggest obstacles is understanding this and being ready to teach—having teaching moments. Not so much that it has to be on a regimented schedule in a classroom, but when circumstances present themselves.

For example, the organization of the school's structure provides flexibility for the students. The school officially opens for students at 8:30 a.m., and teachers are allowed to leave at 5:00 p.m. Some staff members stagger their evening responsibilities until 7:30 p.m. to assist students on individualized work or projects, or are simply available. The

studio hours are extended to 7:30 p.m. each night, and the studio is open on both Saturday and Sundays.

These hours assist students who need flexibility in their schedules due to family obligations, work, homelessness, and the like. It is becoming commonplace for schools to elongate their days to increase learning time for students—primarily in city or urban settings. Moreover, HSRA's students have a somewhat flexible policy in relation to class attendance. This is rarely seen in traditional schools. Students understand that attendance will affect their trajectory toward graduation, but does not affect their immediate marks. For example, Lauren, who has attended the school for approximately two years, was homeless with her son, and working one job. She said:

> I appreciate the school hours because it fits into my work schedule and stuff, and things that I do. 'Cause I get from a lot of people, "You be at school from like 9:30-5:00?" Well, sometimes I do, but other times it's like, no, I just come in and it's not like a lot of schools where you can't come in after a certain time (then) you're marked tardy. Not at this school. You come in, sign your name, show them that you were here for the day and . . . you know to come to school and do what you have to do to graduate. (June 3rd)

The attendance record is kept through the sign-in-and-out sheet at the front desk and is shared with the school's administrative support. Advisors of students also keep record of student attendance. Follow through with students who have low attendance is shared responsibility between advisors and administrative support. There is no tardy pass if a student arrives after 8:30 a.m., no early-dismissal paperwork is required, and there is no marking as a late arrival. All open hours are suitable for student entry or exit. One particular student states that he appreciates the fact that this school:

> . . . is a credit recovery program. It's not a GED program, you get your diploma. I'm just grateful that I could earn my credits, make music, go on field trips, and do a lot of fun stuff that I couldn't really do at a traditional school because of my grades, or my behavior, or just the simple fact that I was absent a

> couple of times, because of money. . . . It was just a lot of issues. . . . So I appreciate the fact that they're more flexible (Deez, June 3rd).

Donny, the teacher, remembers a student he was very proud of for combating the many obstacles that affected him, and realizes that the school's flexible schedule assisted in the process. He tells the story of this boy:

> His whole family was homeless. I think this school was just convenient because you know, we're open late and we have a lot of support and sentiment. We make accommodations. At first, him and his family had to leave before school was out especially in winter, before it got dark. Because when they lived in Chicago one time, they [the kids] were abducted walking home from school, and they were gone for a long time. Somehow, they got them back and they were just scared to walk home in the dark. So our school can make accommodations like that. We're flexible, so that was *one* reason why they came. (June 9th)

While most educational systems demand that students conform to a regimented schedule, with little regard to "obstacles" that may inhibit a student to fully engage in their educational setting, this school provides flexibility.

Course Scheduling

To support this flexibility, the school implements strategic scheduling of the more formalized instruction needed for math, sciences, and language arts right before and after lunch. This makes it easier for students to put forth their best effort to attend the afternoon courses, where they acquire the mandatory credits required by the State. Each student interviewee understands and appreciates the fact that this strategic scheduling is designed to fit their individual needs. I often heard, "I have to be at work by 3:00 today" (Interview, MJ), or "I have to go home early to babysit my baby sister" (Observation, Cashious). For reasons like this, offering required courses mid-day helps students to meet required academics, rather than penalizing them for their life circumstances.

Likewise, due to the artistic nature of the school, studio time is granted as an incentive to finish projects for their personal learning plan (PLP):

> I usually get here in time for my first class to start and that's at 11:00. Then I just go to all my classes, get my PLP signed so I can get my access pass, so I can have my break. 'Cause I need the access pass, without it you really can't do too much. (Cassey, June 3rd)

Another student views it "like a college, you know, till our first class. Language arts is required, and throughout the whole time of my day here, I'm looking for any opportunity to get on the stage . . . or get into the studio" (MJ, June 4th).

The focus group has plenty to say about studio time and access passes. Khristine says, "I exceeded a lot, work-wise, here. It started getting harder for me and then I started getting opportunity to go into the studio and do something that I like to do." Everybody chimes in, "Yeah, yeah," and Autumn continues:

> A lot of kids come in and they love music. They love music, but they've never had a way to like, feel that encouragement in the way that studio time and being in the studio as an incentive does! By going to your simple math class or simple reading class, that's a real good incentive. (June 5th)

As I enter and exit the recording studios freely, I never witness teachers asking students for their access pass. I didn't see one either, though the students are aware of the expectation and seem to follow it.

Who would argue that this kind of non-traditional school structure is rare? More common is a regimented structure that imposes a plethora of rules for African American students who are thought to need constant supervision and are not capable of achieving high standards. But this school aligns with the notion that exemplary teaching includes maintaining high expectations (Ladson-Billings, 1995a; Lipman, 1995). The flexible

schedule does not mean lowering standards—it means high standards of self-discipline that requires close student/teacher relationships.

Lauren sums this up as we sit together in the interview. Her baseball cap and double-layered flannel shirt remind me that even though it is June, it's still cold. We begin talking about what she appreciates about this program, and she says that teachers care and want the students to succeed—and, most of all, to do their best. She says this of them:

> We love you so much that we would rather ask you to leave than stay here and not do [any]thing. Because why come to school if you weren't planning on doing what you have to do? I just like the system, the system is set up nice to me. (June 3rd)

Lauren identifies that love, expectations, and school structure all contribute to her graduation and success. "They're not going to keep barking down your back about your education when you should be the one that wants to do better . . . but they expect you to graduate; they really want you to get on your stuff."

Some students say that the structure and expectations of the school are similar to a "college, or a pre-college, getting us prepared for the future" (Cashious), and "make(s) us more independent" (Autumn). The structure allows flexibility, yet demands self-reliance and self-dedication. MJ agrees: "It's kinda just like you get your personal learning plan, your PLP . . . be at those classes and try your best." Deez, too (who reminds me a bit of Tupac because of their similar political, social, and lyrical commentary), agrees that independence and self-initiation contribute to their learning. He leans his 5'11" frame back into his chair, with his dreadlocks hanging neatly and freely, swaying back and forth as they mimic his head movements. He pushes them out of his face every so often, maintaining relatively close eye contact with me, and confirms that:

> Basically, the program is designed for you to learn, to think outside of the box, to be more independent. So that's why they're a little more lenient with the rules here, because they want you to be independent, they want us to grow. And they have the music side of it for us.

HSRA breaks traditional boundaries by restructuring hours and course scheduling to meet the needs of its students, while maintaining high expectations of its students by creating space where young people with difficult "real-life situations" can still succeed and "amount to something" (TJ, Graduation).

Teacher and Student Relationships

> I love the family here, I love the staff. I love the school model [structure], the project-based learning concept. I know it's not perfect, but the whole desire is to improve. We want to make it a better facility for young people. I think we've built a cool ship and I want to keep sailing it. (Peter, June 5th)

Relationships, structure, and project-based learning go hand in hand. To find out what the students find valuable in the teaching, and how its serves as a means of learning, I ask how the program's philosophy is illustrated through teaching and learning.

Asking students what works at HSRA in terms of teaching and curricula illuminates what has not worked for them at other schools. For example, each student I interview discusses previous negative experiences with teachers, which contribute to their disengagement. This was true in the focus group, as well. As the six students and I sit around discussing what is working for them at HSRA, Cashious begins: "In one of my old schools, I had a teacher that literally punched me. She punched me on my back. She told me I wasn't going to make it. She told me that I wasn't smart enough to pass her class!" I ask him, "Do you think it was racial?" and he replies, "I don't know what it was. All I know was that she was the adult!"

Cashious expresses no concern about race; rather, it mattered to him that an adult teacher didn't believe in him and his ability. I witness his hurt. Then Autumn chimes in, "Yeah, like in a regular school, I swear nobody gave a damn about me at all." Heads are lowered and it feels a bit somber in the room. I know the conversation will eventually turn around, but Cashious continues:

> I literally tested it one time in one school. I wasn't doing my work and I knew the teacher was going to say something. She was like, "Why aren't you working?" I was like, "I ain't going to be shit anyways." And that was cool with her. She left me alone for the rest of the class.

Everybody laughs, knowing how ridiculous this sounds, since they have watched Cashious bloom into a dedicated student, musician, producer, emcee, and entrepreneur. Each student tells a similar story, and, as I predicted, the conversation soon turns to a deep love for their teachers at HSRA. "But I got two teachers in this school that I trust my life with . . . like I love those two teachers . . . " (Khristine). Jason agrees with a "Yep!" while Khristine continues, "It basically changes your whole life experiences. That's why I'm glad I heard about [this school]." Everybody rambles off in chaotically, teenage-style, over-talking each other as they name their favorite teacher(s). Some agree, saying, "Yeah, she's cool." And no one disagrees with somebody else's favorite. Others admit to testing teachers to gauge their "coolness." Each teacher passes with flying colors, even in the moments when they display "nerd" qualities (Jason). It seems to come down to the fact that teachers display *care* and make learning "fun." (Cashious, Autumn, Jason, Khristine). Dean concludes: "This school cares." Yes, I see how the school's philosophies of love and education go hand in hand.

My mind returns to the literature that challenges the stereotype of deficit African American students, and re-focuses on success, quantifiable or not (Ware, 2006). TJ

understands this, and ensures that HSRA's philosophies are embedded in the school's pedagogy, teaching, and curricula:

> It's really about one student at a time . . . one learner at a time . . . having the ability to get a hold of and work with them, and give them an opportunity to be successful. Really tap in to what their strengths are rather than pointing out what their weaknesses are . . . and start bridging those things together and making it whole. (June 5th)

"One student . . . one learner at a time" accentuates the concept of individualized instruction and reinforces individual's positives. It allows time for weaknesses to be identified, and brings them together, "making it whole." The teachers believe that each student is unique and has their own strengths. During my stay, I heard an occasional grumble about behavioral issues, suspensions, and re-admissions, but the consensus was that teachers appreciate the students' "intelligence and their ideas" (Niles, June 8th). Or they appreciate "their creativity and their ideas" (Peter, June 6th), and the fact that, "they're so creative . . . genuine and thoughtful" (Tommy, May 24th). As TJ (June 5th) states:

> There's a lot of excitement and opportunity so they want to stay here, they want to figure out a way to keep working, and I really appreciate their honesty and truthfulness. I think there is a lot of raw Hip-Hop, kind of in your face, tell it like it is, you know? I really appreciate that . . . I want to know what your nuances are, and how you're getting down, and what your value system is, and they're willing to share that. . . . The other thing I like is the support. If something's happening or going down . . . they will really come together and form up like Voltron, you know, and get the job done . . . these kids are incredible when it comes to raising to the height and over the expectations.

Donny (June 9th) confirms this:

> They're hard-working, especially in the studio. They want something, they want to make it, and they can spend 24 hours trying to do that. . . . They hustle, and I really admire that about them and it motives me . . . they have hope for something better.

In these examples, I hear nothing about *good teaching* centered on state music-competition placements, or how well students perform the *William Tell Overture*, or whether they pass the State Arts Assessments. Instead, I observe teachers invested in students' ingenuity, creativity, work ethic, and well-being, who believe that the students are capable, creative, and hardworking. As I sit with TJ and discuss this idea, he remarks that the system does not appreciate this student-centered approach because:

> . . . [it makes it] harder for the teacher to qualify. You gotta fit everything into a check box, and to me, that's just not what learning is all about . . . you can't access a basketball player with the criteria of a gymnast . . . it's not going to come out right, and that's what the big school system is trying to do. They want to put everything in a box . . . a score, but really that's the teachers in the community's job. Because *we* know what we want our students to know. And if we're working with them every day, and we push them to the top of their potential and work with then, then no test is going to tell you that. But you have to really know your student and validate their learning experiences. (June 5th)

Both TJ and Tommy articulate that national standards, assessment, and student learning do not necessarily promote the same agenda for this creative school and the population they serve. This is partly why Donny chose a teaching career in Special Education. It might be harder for him to qualify as a successful teacher, when assessed by his student scores, but he is aware of how race and assessment are inter-related:

> Race is one of the biggest reasons why I *am* teaching. When I look around, I see *me*, and we're at the bottom, at the wrong end of every statistic. But there's opportunity which there hasn't always been and . . . My teaching is to help see and take advantage of those opportunities. I'm constantly thinking about what can we do about this achievement gap? What can we do to motivate students to *want* to do well, you know, change the culture? I'm trying different things all the time, just trying and trying. That's one of the main reasons why I am here at this school, because they are trying something different. And I said, 'I'd like to get on that team and see what I can do.' It's a lot of experimentation. And everything doesn't work . . . you know I *want* to work with Black people, young Black people. That's why I'm here and most of them *are* in Special Education, and that's a big reason why I am there. So no matter *where* I go, *where* I teach, there's going to be Black students, because I'm a Special Education teacher. So, I'm trying to help, I'm trying to do my part, but racism plays a big part with what I do. (June 9th)

Donny chose this career because he *wants* to teach students who remind him of himself; as he says, “I see me.” He looks for innovative techniques to motivate his students to “want to do well.” He also understands that policy and racism often relegate African American youth to Special Education courses. In Chapter 1, I address this in regards to how Seattle public schools offer approximately 30 students a “Black Scholars” option, an injustice that is often accepted as the status quo. The staff at HSRA, on the other hand, recognizes this injustice and recognize a need for alternative forms of assessment that ultimately require unstandardized forms of curricula.

Curriculum

The school’s open canvas structure stretches into teaching and curriculum. Niles, a teacher, is thought to be “rich” by students because of his commitment to dressing in *cool* attire. Hi signature accessory are hats, most often a 1920s-newsboy hat. This day, he sports one in chocolate corduroy, slanted off to the side, accompanied by slacks and a suit jacket. All he needs is a cigar hanging from his mouth and I’d think I was in a scene with one of the characters in *Godfather* (1972), or better yet, the movie *Idlewild* (2006). As an advisor at the school, Niles explains that HSRA is a “project-based school where students are able to choose a certain project that has to do with their interest…and then we tie that interest into other subjects” (June 8th). These projects are subject-determined and student-driven. Depending on the subject, whether it is science, English, social studies or the like, students can choose how to incorporate their interests into the project. The goals and standards are set, but *what* they explore within that particular subject and *how* they student design their project, is individualized.

Personal Learning Plan

With an open canvas, curriculum still requires structure and design, especially in meeting State requirements. For this reason, students are still required to accomplish benchmarks in their Personal Learning Plans (PLPs), which include State requirements for math, sciences, and language arts. TJ discusses an example of standardized learning:

> We use validation. . . . We have 12 areas of competency, so each area has to be validated for a student to graduate. . . . They get on the computer, log into *Excellence*, go to the competencies and start writing, explaining, and demonstrating how they met competency. . . . There are areas in math, science, social studies . . . and one of the areas is that you have to have a letter of acceptance from a college of higher learning. . . . Once you've completed all of them to the State standards, as well, then you graduate (May 24th)

These competencies are sometimes referred to as "benchmarks" (Tommy), or "requirements" (Deez, Jay D), or "testing" (Kamy, MJ). Niles reiterates that project-based learning is a core value of the school, no matter what subject is taught:

> We tie the interest of the students into other subjects matter that they need the credit in . . . the daily language arts (DLA) and the standard math class . . . in DLA, I'm able to add in different aspects of literature . . . or we work in the studio where they get to work on writing, more like a brainstorming writing class. (June 8th)

The members of the focus group agree that they "tie the interest of the students into other subject matters," and are passionate about their learning. Autumn, the young lady who caught my attention with her cool, colorfully striped tube sox, Hi-top Converse, shorts, and unique, confident demeanor, says:

> That's the reason why this school is such a good place, because you can learn way more creatively. . . . I'm a smart person, but I'm smart at my own pace. Like I hate working in a big group where everybody is supposed to be doing the exact same thing. I will *not* succeed at all! So the fact that I can do a project on photography, about science, is just a way, cause I'm doing what I love, I love *what* I'm doing, *how* I need to do it, how I'm *best* at doing it and I'm also *learning* from it. (Autumn, Focus Group)

I only have a moment to contemplate what Autumn asserts before everybody chimes in and talks about the subjects they used to hate. I focus on Dean, who adds, "Yeah, I *hate* geometry . . . but it's easy now. Like I can *do* it, it's easy now," he confidently claims with a smile slightly slanted to the right. "How did it become easy?" I ask. "They just make it fun. . . . She [his advisor] actually finds what I can relate to: basketball, girls, or music. That's the best way to get me to understand" (Focus Group). I ask if the arts contribute to their engagement, and Autumn explains:

> Well, there's the project *Get your Green*, when I first got here . . . that was with the Environmental Group. . . . I was never a health guru or environmentalist . . . and I was approached by Peter. He said 'I see you with your three sisters and you guys did a *Ready for the Road* song. Why don't you come do a *Get Your Green* Song?' and I had been in the class, but I didn't really know too much about it, until they gave us some readings and stuff, and we learned about it, and we made a song out of it. And I was thinking, I didn't even *know* that global warming means the world is heating up, I just thought global warming was . . . bad. (Focus Group, June 5th)

Global warming *is* bad, I think to myself, but I understand her point: that she learned about it through a "fun" project, "way more creatively, " and "at your own pace." Similarly, MJ talks about *Get Your Green* in his interview:

> We got a lot of exposure on *Get Your Green*. It started out as a science class when we were talking about turning out the lights, saving electricity. It was always more than just throwing away trash. . . . Kids in the school first used to run around like awe, those are the *Get Your Green* boys and they're the science boys, they aren't doing anything. Then, when they started to see that we were going on the road. You know, we in the Philly airport eating cheesesteaks and we doing all these things, you know—touring, doing all of these things, doing shows. Last school year, we did . . . the Media Arts, uh. . . . First Avenue, we shut down First Avenue with [two famous rappers]. It was phenomenal, like that was the best show . . . that was one of the best shows of my life . . . we did the State Capital show, something for Earth Day, then we did the State Urban League with the NAACP and I got a free membership to the NAACP. All off of just doing this stuff that they was calling us the 'Science Boys,' just by you know, turning out the lights. (June 4th)

In the same way, *Keepin it Wheel* is an example of how creative teaching and curricula can engage students in unfamiliar topics:

> Yeah . . . it's like *Keepin it Wheel*. This is learn[ing] about bicycles and stuff, but they made it fun. They let us into the studio, we made songs about it, safety gear, everything. . . . I was like 'who knew this could be fun!' So I got interested in the class. They did something that caught our attention that would make us want to stay and learn something. . . . At first, to me, it was just about making a song, but when we started making a song, I started learning more about all this safety stuff, safety gear, helmet. So I was like, OK! I had fun in the process of learning! (Khristine, Focus Group)

I think back to my first day at the school and remember the group who went to Canada, riding their self-made bikes and playing the CD they had produced, which rang out from speakers mounted on the back of their bikes. I realize that it's the same project. Dean speaks up: "If people . . . like to shoot video and take pictures, they can get science credit, they can get history credit, they can even get English credit for doing a project on a photo shoot or something. That's why people like *Get Your Green*" (Focus Group).

In addition, the extensive use of audio-production and beat-making capabilities makes it possible for students who are interested in these art forms to achieve a semi-formal, tiered advancement in production. Peter admits that he would like to improve the production curricula, especially as they move into the new building, but as he sits with me behind the recording booth and glances back and forth at it, he recollects his first day of teaching:

> I remember the first day, I had about 15-20 young men in there and they were all extremely gifted rap artists. And I'm sitting with them in the circle, the gears there and they're talking, and I just kept saying to myself, 'I hope they just keep talking, keep talking guys, keep talking,' so I don't have to do anything. All of a sudden, dead silence, and they stop talking. They look at me and say 'So, what are we going to do?' And I remember exactly my response. I said, 'Well, what do you want to do?' And it immediately hit me that what my instincts told me was that there were no manuals, and I'm just going to show them what I know, what I do, and so the first thing I had them do was pair up. I was using Studio Vision at the

> time. How to sequence, record, and that was what I used to get them involved. And they were just hands-on, 'show us,' so after that it was just facilitating. (June 6th)

Even though Peter has written curricula, his work with the students seems to have remained hands-on and experiential—more of a one-on-one teaching method. I observe this one day as he and a student go through the assessment sheets, one by one, checking off each finished task. The student would show him the process, and he would check it off. It became apparent to me, though, that the individual learning opportunities designed into the curriculum, which combine students' creative, critical, production, and entrepreneurial skills, is what they acknowledge to have fun with.

From Critical Inquiry to Production: "It's a beautiful thing"

> What the teachers really do here, they just supply the concept and the education on it, and the background, and the students go and make everything else. (Autumn, Focus Group)

At HSRA, the creative arts, critical inquiry, and production go hand-in-hand. One is not without the other. "It's a beautiful thing," says Niles.

> The first day I taught the Hip-Hop History and the Arts Class, there were like 29 students in there. It was incredible . . . and to have their undivided attention, eyes open . . . they were just completely showing attention. It was conversation that was had there, too. We really went deep into who we really wanted to become, what would it truly take to get there, what do you have to shed, sacrifice . . . because to see who they really are behind what they show . . . was a beautiful thing, because right when somebody shows me that depth, that's when I see the masks coming off, their potential, real selves. (June 8th)

Niles identifies that through "deep conversations," students reveal their "real selves." He allows time for conversation during class, for their voices to be heard and their dreams to be explored. Focusing on the students' potential seems to contribute to the development and expression of their creativity—another example of an open canvas.

They are offered an open, unrestricted space to express, and, most importantly, as Niles says, their "eyes [are] open." The masks come off as students consider the sacrifice it takes in order "get there." I wonder: where? But I realize that it's not the point, because *where* can be anywhere they choose. It is open for possibilities.

During the focus group, four of the six students had participated in either the *Urban Music Class*, or the *Hip Hop History and the Arts* course. Each agrees that the courses combine, "history, and thinking outside of the box" (Cashious, Dean, Autumn, Deez). Sitting in the focus groups with these energetic students, I see how much they consider producing art works as valuable learning experiences.

I direct a comment to Dean, "I've heard you in the Hip Hop History and the Arts [course]." He answers, "Yeah, with Niles?" I nod my head and he continues, "Yeah, he's [Niles] working on this album and it has songs that help kids motivate themselves to get to the next level." Autumn chimes in, "It's kind of like Urban Music." "Yeah," Dean adds, and continues, "Um, we did this song called *Where We're Going*. Like, what's the next step?" Autumn adds, "I was in that video." Later she offers insight into the production but, for now, Dean continues:

> Yeah, the song we're doing. It's like about where you're trying to get to in your future, where you're trying to go. It was like [the video], them trying to get to their future and to their success and everything, but there were two people that was holding them back so, like there is a fighting scene, a graduation scene.

Dean adds, "Like, all the hoodies have words on them. They represent something. One's Depression, one says Stress, one is Emotions—all these things that get in your way from getting to graduation or our education." Autumn, who acted in the video and assisted with editing, says, "It's good visuals about what we go through…in our regular

life." There is a pause as students reflect, and I ask, "So who created the song?" Dean tells me, "Niles made the blueprint. Then he picked artists." Autumn confirms:

> Like Jason, he's made *so* many beats for Niles' Hip Hop History and the Arts class . . . but the students come in and write their own lyrics, they write the chorus, melodies, all that. Just the teachers have the education behind it. And so it's just really, really student-driven. But he went through a lot of students. (Focus Group)

Khristine adds, "A lot! Basically, like every student in this school had a chance to be on this song . . . some people didn't take it serious, though, you know?" Jay D adds, "Well, if I had been here, I would have been on it!" He laughs, while Khristine sings, "*Where I'm Going"* rather silently, having a musical moment by herself, but adding a nice melody to the room. Then she answers my original question: "But really, what Niles did was work the video and the beat, 'cause the day that"—and she is interrupted by Dean, saying, "That's true." Khristine continues, "'Cause the day we started the song, Monica came up with the chorus. We were sitting at the table. We was singing it . . . then he told us to write that down. And he came up with his words. . . . " Their insight on how the CD and video came to final production is helpful because Niles himself later confirms this during his interview. He tells me, with his corduroy hat on, still slanted off to the side:

> Yeah, I did some background singing on it, some writing here and there, not verse-wise, but chorus-wise . . . but I mostly guided it. They did most of it . . . and I think they liked it because it's guidance, it's showing them how things are done, should be done in order to make um . . . a product that is worthwhile, in order to make a product that has legs, that will stand the in the test of time. . . . So that was the approach to it. . . . I guided it, but they did what they did on it, and they did most of the writing. (June 8th)

I see how creating a product that will "stand in the test of time" is accompanied by student-driven process designed to encourage critical thinking about their lives—an

inward reflecting that results in outward producing. I think about this and continue, "Yeah, I saw you shooting the last scene for the video."

A couple of days earlier, Niles told me that they would be shooting it. What I constructed in my head about this process was very different from real life. I had been told they would shoot two different scenes. One was the graduation scene, as students walk across the stage to get their diploma; and the other was where the *elder* sits and talks with these young men as a spiritual mentor. My understanding of the context was very simple.

As I walk into the multi-purpose cafeteria, someone is in the DJ booth playing some of the latest hits, as students sit, walk, talk, dance, watch, and direct instructions, while the actors gather close to the front of the stage, practicing, waiting, listening, talking, focused, and laughing. The entire school is invited and most students who are present attend because they serve as extras in a scene. The atmosphere in the cafeteria is like a controlled party, with vibrant activity in every corner. Niles runs around, making things ready. Dave, a teacher, is on the stage talking to students, dressed in his costume—a blue-and-white graduation robe—and waits for filming to begin. He will play the teacher who passes out the graduation certificates.

I am impressed with how they use the strengths of the entire community to produce a piece of art. About 10 minutes later, after everybody is placed in their spots, after the main actors are placed, after the camera is positioned and ready to go, and after Niles has turned off the DJ music, a student stands up in front of the actors with a clapperboard and says, "Take 1!" SLAP, down goes the clapperboard. Four takes later, they're finished with both scenes and everybody resumes their former activities.

Days later, I watch a few students, with Niles, Tommy, and Damien—the videographer teacher—edit a portion of the video. They huddle around one computer, with Damien as today's designated editor of the scene that the focus group talked about a week prior: the black hoodies with the names of emotions fighting each other, representing the battle of life, their lives, their concept. Ideas are thrown out, one by one, from student to teacher, from teacher to editor, and from editor to student. I think how unique it is to witness such a collaborative creative process, from start to fruition. I see students excited about their product, I see students talking through their ideas about of their art, I see artistry in the making as students and teachers act in a video and produce it, and I see them edit. I also see how time is a factor in attaining their goal of a finished product, but that this time is fluid and spontaneous. But I also realize that this is only one of many projects, because, as Autumn says during the focus group:

> We have so many songs for *Urban Music* that Donny teaches. Like we did that song, *MAAT*. Remember, Molly came in and came up with the concept, and then all the students just wrote off of it . . . it flowed well. If you were determined, if you were in class on time, then you would have a spot on the song. . . . So, really, the teachers have the ideas and the concepts, and the students create it. (Focus Group, June 5th)

The students expanded further on *MAAT* later in the focus group, and their pride is apparent, as was their appreciation of the experience to "think critically and to have a place that is really empowering" (Autumn). I've never really heard that from a high-school student before. Autumn went on to discuss how she thinks that race is also critically thought about when she tells me, "We touch down on race every now and then, on songs. Like that song *MAAT*," and, Autumn tells me, "The chorus goes":

> All those chains and whips, all that hate made us stronger.
> to all that pain that was forced on our ancestors
> we're stronger than ever

> we're stronger and better
> you can't break us because we're stronger and better
> "That's the chorus to *MAAT* It touches back to our ancestors." (June 5th)

She pauses for a moment and continues:

> And the song is just about oppression . . . because Urban Music is about Urban Life where *we* are Urban Life. . . . If you think of Urban, you think of Blacks . . . and this school is empowering to us. Because you go to a regular school and you see minorities and they're not doing well. They're lower on the success scale, because they're not fitting in the rest of the environment. And you come here and all you see is minorities and they're doing *so* many great things.

I think how deep and heartfelt her thoughts are:

> This school is really empowering to African American youth, 'cause it's a place where we can really succeed and be ourselves. Not be told *how* to succeed, but be *helped* to succeed . . . it challenges you, and it pinpoints your strong points and then it makes you succeed. . . . It's just really empowering. It's nice to see.

Everybody in the rooms agrees, either with a verbal "um hum," or with silent head nods. Cashious jumps in again and brings the conversation back to Autumn's original point: "*MAAT*, now that's a classic song, though." Autumn agrees, "Man, that needs to be the school song. . . . I'm just going to rap it." Without pause, she begins, with no music or an accompanying beat:

> I am speaking for every one of my brothers and my sisters in the struggle that made nothing into something I know / times make it hard but please don't hold it down it seems / like we are nothing trapped for a while / I'm trying to be physically and mentally empowered and wanting to go far. . . .

Then she looks to Cashious and asks, "What's your verse?" Cashious begins,

> I said, lost in a world my morals stranded/raised without a father statistically I'm damaged / but he the reason why I'm inspired / I hustle and . . . my desires/plus my momma just got fired / Everybody laid off / their car, no they paid off/plus them three kids cost/you still hold your head like a boss / work hard know later it will pay off / The system trying to break me. The system trying to break me. . . .

The group claps for them, and the conversation moves to another subject. But a week later, Donny sheds light on this same opportunity for critical inquiry during his

interview. He scrolls through his music and gives back-story on each of the songs, their original concept, and how it was taught, explored, and created. He comes across *MAAT:*

> I have a song here that is a racial pride thing. They were studying an Egyptian word called MAAT, and it's about resilience, you know, continuing on this fight as a race. . . . The chorus goes, "the system's trying to break me, the system's trying to take me. . . . " But they took my voice during class without me knowing it. (June 9th)

He laughs with a combination of embarrassment and caution as he tells how the students recorded his voice during a class lecture and then took that recording to overdub in their song, *MAAT*. His unpredicted lyrics begin the song with his words, "They can't take what I got." He understands that today's technology can be a powerful tool for engagement and can also become a detriment, adding, "You never know."

Then he begins to talk about how the song is really about "power; don't let the environment dictate who you are. You have the power to dictate your environment . . . just help them feel that what they have to say is meaningful, and they have something to offer. . . . " He makes it clear that he doesn't just mean racial oppression, but a consciousness of their position in life and accessing the power to guide their path—and, more importantly, to "feel . . . meaningful." HSRA shows how there is a place for critically conscious students use multi-modal tools to express themselves in meaningful ways. Students in his class have written more than 50 songs, which range from internal critical reflections of themselves and their racial, economic, and social positions, to outward critical reflection of social systems. One of these inwardly conscious songs is titled *Karma*.

Donny tells me, in *Karma*, "this young lady is just talking what she's doing, why it doesn't work anymore, and how she's trying to tell young people to don't follow her

steps." Donny pushes Play on his computer and a smooth beat begins—neither hurried nor too slow. "What goes around comes around . . . " are the first lyrics reflecting this student's struggle to change and make a difference in someone else's life. Eventually, it will come back to her through good *karma*.

Donny tells me a story about one of his "favorite" outwardly conscious songs:

> My *favorite* one is the 13th . . . It's about the 13th Amendment. We studied it and how it was supposed to end slavery. However, when slavery was illegal and abolished, [unless] you committed a crime . . . they could be arrested and become slaves again . . . so we studied private prisons and the 13th Amendment. . . . We read it many times, read an article, and we did a lot of YouTube studies. And these guys were mostly in my special education class, and they're not getting the awards, but this class ties them into the school. (June 9th)

Donny has a deep understanding of the complex nuances of the school. His diverse teaching interests—from Special Education to creating the *Urban Music* class—coupled with the support of the school, enabled him to form a creative and all-inclusive teaching space, one that encouraged a critical consciousness of self and society.

Finally, I want to include a story that illustrates how students combine critically conscious research with production, not necessarily in association with a specific class, but for personal projects. Two female students are exploring racial and judicial inequities involved in the Trayvon Martin case (2012-2013). As I walk into the empty cafeteria one afternoon, music greets my ear. Looking around, I see Dionne working in the sound booth. As I approach her, she looks up with a smile that radiates from ear to ear. Our cordial hellos are followed by a private video show-and-tell, and she tells me that, "My friend, Autumn, and I wrote a song, produced the music, and made a video about Trayvon Martin. The school was talking about it, and I just decided I wanted to do something with it." She plays me her YouTube channel, where their Trayvon Martin

video is located. I observe how lyrics, beat, music, and critically conscious video production are combined in this one project and I realize how unusual it is to see students exploring such multi-modal literacies in music programs, especially with such heartfelt conscious content. I ask Dionne to replay it for me again, because it is a lot to take in. I become emotional – not as much for Trayvon Martin as for the students—who have used this platform and space to express their grief, their questions, their anger, their frustration, and their sense of connection to this Florida teen.

Traditional schools allow little space for self-directed, critically conscious activities, especially when it comes to music education. So I bring this up during the focus group. We begin discussing whether or not they have opportunities to explore topics related to race, or societal issues at large, when Autumn brings up this very project:

> Yeah, a meaningful song that I did here was called *Mr. Martin.* It was about the Trayvon Martin case. Everybody knows about it. And the teachers hooked onto it and liked to talk about it. And anybody who wanted to could make a song. It was not really a [formal] class, but . . . I went in there and I was like, "Wow I like this, OK, can I write to this?" So really, it was a subject that touched me. Because I was like, *wow,* he was *this* young and he was blatantly, violently attacked for *no* reason. His life was *stolen* from him for *no reason at* all. So, that's when we put that emotion and that feeling into it, and I'm in the booth crying! This is the type of stuff you see on TV. You don't realize this is real life—like that stuff actually happens to a 15-year-old guy, or a kid. His life was taken from him for no reason, and it's like wow, you put your feelings and emotions into it and you're likely to paint a picture of what you're saying.

Autumn's comment touches on multiple topics. Her frustration and sadness is met with questions about reason, awareness of injustice, and a platform for expression. The audio and video production is triggered by emotion, attached to a social consciousness, and embeds the idea that art has the ability to paint a picture of the story. Whether this form of learning and artistic production is connected to a class or individual project is not

important; what is important is that students are engaged and motivated by this means of learning.

Critical thinking, production, and freedom of expression require time, dedication, thought, planning, execution, cooperation, and receivers of knowledge who simultaneously contribute to the environment, becoming teachers themselves through their productions. As is evident, HSRA also includes a large focus on entrepreneurial skills. After all, TJ's first comment about creating the school was that the students "wanted to know everything about the business." So, entrepreneurial learning plays a major role in HSRA's focus on students becoming productive, critical contributors to their surroundings.

Becoming Entrepreneurial

> The students are intrigued by intellectual property, and want to make sure that they can secure what they have done. (TJ, June 5th)

Learning that connects students to real-life situations reinforces TJ's purpose in establishing the school: "how to engage students to just be hungry and passionate about learning. . . . " Including entrepreneurial training relates to the 21st century calling for musicians to be business minded. This, in turn, re-shapes the re-definition of self. Claiming the self as *being* is part of the process of becoming musicians, lyricists, and producers; entrepreneurial ownership demands that a person claim their art form and be ready for recognition when it comes. They stake a claim to a product that represents them as individuals.

TJ is aware that the entrepreneurial interests at the beginning of the school were directed at copywriting and gaining experience in securing "intellectual property." And

he knew that encouraging this would create a learning environment that engages students because of its real-life, hands-on relevance. During my time at HSRA, I witness students wanting to learn more about how to secure their creations, so that people can't come in and "steal my stuff" (Cashious, Jay D, Cassey).

Although they hope for financial rewards in the future, this does not define their success. MJ says, "Hip-Hop needs an MJ . . . you know I may not sell the most records, but I believe I can make it even if I don't sell 100 million. I believe people want to hear realness, and a story" (June 4th). Miles, too, says: "Fun to me is sitting in the studio, making hard work all day, every day, or just making music. . . . I eventually want to do a home studio, so I can make money that way" (June 7th). Indeed, most of the students I interview dream of having a music business of some sort, but others want to be psychologist, a lawyer, or a business major.

More recently, the school's offerings in relation to entrepreneurial learning range from participation in campaigns with large corporate affiliates to producing videos, CDs, and flyers, and designing clothing logos for state and national education departments. Tommy reiterates:

> We're thinking about offering the most creative high-quality product in terms of what we do creatively and that we're thinking about new trends . . . new technologies, new opportunities for collaboration, new markets, so it's very entrepreneurial in that sense. . . .

He continues, "So the students want to share their interests, share their creativity—to record it, to market it, to understand it, to be a better creative person as well as a better business person . . . they are enterprising" (May 24th). Working with local, state, and national organizations allows real-life opportunities to arise; and, more importantly, students become creators and producers in an entrepreneurial setting.

This comes up when TJ mentions the national organization, *Junior Achievement.* He recalls the student group that, in 2012, won the national title through their self-directed ideas and creativity:

> We have Junior Achievement. The first year, they entered Junior Achievement and created a company called *LYME,* which stood for Leave Your Mark Everywhere, where they will sell radio ads and create jingles for companies in the community. They won the National Title! It was like incredible! They just stepped right up to the plate and did it. And again this year, they had a great business called *Urban Truth and Fashion Agency*. And it was incredible! The show they put on, the project they produced. It all was just phenomenal and blew me away. (June 5th)

TJ realizes that the students' entrepreneurial ideas are accompanied by motivation and engagement, contributing to *success,* by winning the national title. To him, success is measured by how students originate ideas and take ownership of their projects:

> When I first went into the LYME meetings, when they first were starting their business, I went into one of their meetings and they were trying to think of what business they wanted to create, and so I was like, "Well, you know, we've got the school's record label. . . . I think we should take that." And you know, I was trying to suggest to them a route to take of what I thought would be good. So they were like, "nah . . . nah . . . we don't want to do that." And then they started arguing with each other, and they were being really kinda nasty, and I was just observing. And I was like, "Oh, shit, this is gonna be a mess." Right? So I just had to step away from it and they just came through and *blew* it away. [They] won the whole national title with the company they thought up. But for them to really learn the process, they couldn't just follow me, because I'm already a leader, and I know what I want to do, and what my mind is. But their idea was better than mine, because it was from them, and it was their project, and they took ownership of it.

He barely pauses for breath, and continues:

> When I first started the school, we were working on a project called *HIV Ain't No Joke,* and the students created a peer learning program with HASS. They talked to kids about AIDS and STDs and all the problems of promiscuous sex, and what that could cause. So when they got done, I was like, "OK, we're going to put some music and a project around what we learned about AIDS and things." . . . I had some meetings I had to go to in the afternoon and I said, "Now you guys think about this, and when I get back, we're going to start tracking, we're going to do this and do that." You know, I was planning the production

> part, out right? And so I left and when I came back, it was like *all* done. They had the track, the beat, started putting the vocals on. So I was just like *wow*. And they just outdid me by a *long* shot. (TJ, June 5th)

TJ understands that success does not only mean winning national championships—it also means that students take control of their own education, producing something far better than teachers assume possible. And for him, it means that teachers need to get out of the way and let students explore.

I see this when I sit with Damien one afternoon in the visual production room surrounded by computers and photography equipment. Damien shares with me a number of outside organizations that have worked with students in creating multi-modal advertisements. I focus on the Harvard University and United Way project students recently finished. The students who were selected to participate in this project were asked to research "traumatic brain stress" and create a song and video presentation for a national conference. Damien tells me:

> Students really took it personally, 'cause they related to some negative stuff, like abuse, seeing your mother dealing with different issues and you grow up in these situations. And they were like, "Oh, I see why I have these issues with myself, and I want to make sure I don't pass it onto my kids and not repeat the cycle."

He continues:

> So they ended up creating this song called Breathe . . . 'cause that's how they felt it would get their message out. . . . They made a connection between the traumatic brain stress and how, if you were holding your breath, you just wanted to breathe. They felt like that was the feeling of how is when trapped in that situation. . . . You know when you're getting held under water and you're drowning, you just want to get up and breathe. So they just made that connection between . . . how it feels to go through this traumatic brain stress when you see your mom fighting . . . also things you should not be seeing as a kid. You just want to be a kid. (Damien, June 6th)

I think about the effects of domestic violence on young people—how complete confusion, anger, and fear arise. But I never labeled it as a post-traumatic affect. I am awakened. Damien continues:

> We turned it into a video, and we presented it at a huge conference that [the local university] put together. They had a big discussion, and our kids sat in the discussion circles, talked about it, and brought interest in working with youth around this issue. . . . Like you're talking *about* youth, but you're not talking *to* youth. You're talking statistics and scientific findings, but who's really talking to youth. . . . It ended up being placed on blogs around the country. . . . The whole project had a two-week turnaround . . . and we delivered the video the *day* of the conference. We played it on the big screen to see it for the first time, while the others were in a different room. There were only a couple people who were in the room [previewing the video] and he was just like, "It's perfect." That's how close we got to the deadline.

He plays it for me. I read the video-text where two male students are frustrated. They act, sometimes looking into the camera, sometimes hands on heads, searching for peace. Each self-composed verse writes themselves into the music, into the song, into the meaning:

> If you're sick and tired of being alone in this world
> Chase after your dreams
> And all you have to do is believe in yourself / you'll get somewhere
> As long as you understand / There's nothing wrong with needing a helping hand
> Just breathe
>
> Rap: It's crazy when you're young and go through so much
> Seeing my mom going through man after man beat up and drugged out again and again now I'm telling you this story so you can understand these are problems single moms endure, so much I still see my mom on the grind, raising four of us . . . cars to our house, cops at our door, guns drawn in the air, telling us get on the floor,
> I can't breathe.
>
> Spoken: Breathing is the natural reaction to the bodies will to live
> much like brain development of a child is a natural reaction to a child's reaction to learn. By the time a child is three, what they will have seen and done will shape and mold the critical sections of that child's brain for the future.

When schools create space, to nurture and expand the potential and creative thought of young people, it fosters students' ownership of self-identified meaningful experiences. It encourages a consciousness of self and others, and writes themselves into the meaning of the two.

Graduation: "We're a solution to a problem"

As leaders of the school, TJ and Tommy have become its spokespeople. They complement each other perfectly in mission, mind, and thought. Tommy talks about how graduation is the end to the means they have implemented, but, more specifically, that fighting for their right to *do* what they do, *how* they do it, and for *whom* they do it contributes to students' eventual graduation. Nonetheless, they are often subjected to scrutiny and debate, as Tommy states:

> [By] positioning and fighting for the viability of the school when what we're doing is challenged or sometimes caught up in the plot of politics . . . that aren't really student-centered. . . . It's become political, so then I have to go and spend a lot of energy and time defining *what* we are, what we *do*, and *how* this project is important, and how it saves lives. Because a lot of times, statistical data and political rhetoric becomes the groundswell and then people don't understand. We had a serious situation with the State Department in regards to identifying in our school as persistently low-achieving and I thought that was ridiculous because it was all based on a 60% on-time graduation rate . . . which would be impossible because over 70% of our kids are over-aged and under-credited, so they're *not* going to have *on* time graduation rate. We're trying to bridge the gap and get kids back involved in the educational process, but we were expending our time, defending doing something that *needs* to be done, that everyone says *should* be done, but because the only students we serve come from chaotic family situations, disadvantaged backgrounds, and poverty. It takes a lot of tolerance. They're going to get low test scores, and at that time, [the State Department of Education] wasn't measuring growth—they were just measuring a snap shot of the school at one time, which is ridiculous. So a large percent of my energy went to defending these young people and their opportunity to learn, because of politics. (May 24th)

As students work toward graduation, the *means* that foster their success require these school leaders to identify how success is gauged. Tommy's frustration is apparent:

> I think that we still hold our kids to high standards, but if you have a simplistic way of seeing how education ought to be delivered, you're not going to see what we're doing as part of that process. . . . We've boiled down education in this country so much, just about data, that not all of that data really matters, especially with our kids. And there are things that my kids do great and that we do great, that you can't put in data . . . but the system wants to make it our problem. It's really *their* problem for not being bold enough and creative enough to recognize that we need multiple assessments to value what we are doing . . . they're not respecting the complexity of what we are doing. And it's an obstacle when 95% are living in poverty. . . . But we don't complain about it, we recognize it, and then we come together and think about how we deal with it, how we take it on.

Tommy clarifies that, for HSRA, success is partially defined by their ability to deal with the bureaucracy of education. They require high standards, but through non-standardized norms. Their students are "great and they do great things" yet the school has "complex" inter-disciplinary, hands-on assignments that are difficult to score with standardized assessment instruments.

For these historically racialized students, the quantifiable measure of success is graduation. HSRA has over 75% graduation rate and 100% of my interviewees talked of graduation as a goal. Although I have mentioned the graduation ceremony in the previous chapter, it was referred to as "unique," as Dotty puts it (June 8th). The graduating class, of over 30 students, sits in chairs on the stage. About 150 friends, relatives, teachers, and administrators gather to encourage and support the loved students. No administrator gets on stage and delivers a long speech. Simple speeches are projected from the floor, either in front of the stage or from somewhere in the crowd. Parents, friends, family, teachers, and administrators raise their hands for a moment at the microphone, to address either the entire graduating class or a specific student. Students then each have a moment on the

microphone, and pass it from student to student. It is difficult to keep the tears from rolling down my cheeks, and I notice that others are brushing away their tears. Proclamations of love and support are expressed. “You did it! You didn’t let people get in your head who told you that you weren’t going to be anything, and people who told you that you couldn’t do it! You did it!” (Parent, Observation). People clap and I wonder who had told this beautiful, vibrant, woman—a talented singer, dedicated student, and an entrepreneur—that she couldn’t do it?! I was baffled. But the crowd continues with a multitude of similar comments. **[**To DY]: “Congratulations! You did it, people didn’t think you’d make it, but you did. . . . I’m proud of you.” Or, to Jay D: “You overcame, man, obstacles and barriers to get to this point. I’m happy for you.” Students also take time to thank people in their lives, and much of it is directed toward the faculty, “I want to thank all the teachers and staff that helped me do what I had to do to get my diploma” (Student, Observation). The gratitude goes on, and on—too many to recount. Then TJ takes the microphone, speaking in his low, hoarse voice, which engulfs the room with his powerful reputation. His realness is transparent and raw. Standing in front of the stage in his sweat suit and baseball cap, he states:

> Sometimes you need visionaries, and without vision, we wouldn’t have these young people up here today [graduating]. We hear all the time about how youth today really aren’t amounting to much, but they’ve got all these things going on in their lives, so many challenges. And despite what you hear, it’s really a reflection on us in terms of a community, really taking these young people and holding them close to us, and really giving them the guidance and direction that they need. . . . By us coming together as a community, we will be able to make that “maybe they won’t amount to much because of what they’re going through” become just a myth.

TJ's vision of possibility, coupled with community support, fosters African American flourishing, even when society does not believe that these students will "amount to much."

What happens after graduation? Although graduation is a main goal, it is not an end. It is the end of a particular space and time, but it is not considered the end of a student's progression. For example, one of the interviewees who recently graduated returned to HSRA almost daily; she pursued current projects, networked with other students, and still performed. She was interning in the recording studio assisting with studio scheduling, while simultaneously gaining advanced training on the boards.

Half of the students I interviewed state: "If I could go here for college, I would!" As is the case almost everywhere, there are also students who look forward to their graduation to begin their real lives, and for this school, students' dreams are diverse. I hear them say they want to become a psychologist, a forensic scientist, a politician, a photographer, an entrepreneur and businessman—bigger than Jay Z.

Conclusion

As I proceed with this research, many people have asked, "But what do students do after graduation?" The question implies that a high-school diploma is not enough. First, for many of these students, a high-school graduation runs counter to the high drop-out rate among minorities. Most students had dropped out, transferred, and have been disengaged in school. But HSRA is a "life saver" for many of them. This is a powerful message that all schools should hope to attain. Yet America perpetuates the idea that only a college degree is worthy of acknowledgement, so this causes people to ask "What

next?" The way that HSRA has addressed this issue is to require every student slated for graduation to "have an acceptance letter from any institution of higher learning" (TJ, June 5th).

Second, each student I interviewed and observed, desired something for themselves in the future. They consistently talk about what's next and where they are going. Since many of them embrace self-initiation, they understand that they need to make opportunities happen, and this attitude is accompanied by "looking forward" and doing something positive (TJ, DY). This also aligns with the project that Niles explores: the CD release of *The Next Move*. This song and video express the idea of moving forward, fighting a battle to get to where you want to go, and not letting circumstances stop you, if possible.

TJ's philosophy of encouraging students to be "life-long learners" encourages students to question, explore, create, produce, and learn, which helps to foster life-long learners. So, even though an Ivy-League education might not be the answer for all students at HSRA, TJ sums it up well:

> I could have never [created this school] without having the opportunity of getting a high school diploma that I wasn't really that interested in getting. . . . I think it's a milestone. . . . It's an opportunity for us to give our kids validation . . . and tell our kids that, "OK, you're ready to go onto the next thing." It's not about what you get on a test score, because that's not going to matter. It's really not. It's really about, "Are you prepared to be a life-long learner?" (June 5th)

This can only happen where students recognize a place for their voices, looks, sounds, and contradictions to be acknowledged—ultimately developing a new valuing of self, and, in turn, valuing education.

Chapter VI

LET'S TALK ABOUT RACE, BABY

"Let's talk about race, baby," keeps ringing in my head—that infamous 1991 Salt-n-Pepa release, "Let's Talk About Sex, Baby." So, this chapter explores how students talk about, think about, and express race.

First, I explore how students talk about and refer to race in their lives, and how the High School for Recording Arts (HSRA) facilitates discussions through pedagogy and curricula. I refer to literature from Jane Bolgatz (2005) and Lisa Delpit (2002), who find that students desire and appreciate the opportunity to discuss race openly. Second, I refer to learning environments where critical pedagogy and race intersect. Paulo Freire (1974, 1992, 1999), Maxine Greene (1994b), and bell hooks (1994) argue that the use of critical pedagogy is a means of learning that many students find engaging. When specifically interconnected with racial experience, students are able to become critical theorists and find relevancy to in their lives. Third, I explore how students express race, both directly and indirectly, through their art. For this, I use frameworks that mention location, ethnicity, space, and racism, and refer to Greg Dimitriadis (2001) and bell hooks (1990, 1994, 2003a). I then close with the various ways that students consider malleable identities in order to fit into multiple settings, but how they remain dedicated to living their strengths as African American students.

Race Talk: It's Complicated

Race seems difficult to talk about because of its complex historical, political, economic, and judicial histories, which are juxtaposed with heartfelt experiences. It is also difficult to talk about it can be experienced differently according to gender, skin tone, economic status, ethnicity, religion, and location. Diverse African American racial experiences are not bound to a single, one-dimensional view (Womack, 2010)—and for this student body, that may well be true.

> You know I always say race in America is a really complex issue. You know it's the politics, but it's the psychology, and there's a lot of elements to it, and it manifests itself in all of its various kinds of ways here. (Tommy, May 24th)

The "various kinds of ways" that race is addressed at HSRA are observable as students and teachers create, produce, perform, and talk about race. Their comments run the gamut, as these examples of student illustrate: "[Racial experiences] exists, it's always there, it's always present, under the surface, and it's not far under the surface" (Tommy, May 24th); "No, I don't talk about race, it doesn't matter to me" (Cassey); "I talk about race in my lyrics all the time" (Cashious); to "Why you tryin' to act White?" (Jay D).

Over and over again, I observe that Cashious is one of the most verbal students when it comes to anything race-related. During our interview, we begin talking about where and how he talks about race:

> I don't really talk about it at all, at home. Well, actually I do, I'm completely lying about it right now, to think about it. I actually do have something to say about race every single day. . . . I don't want to be that racist person but I feel like it's hard to not be a little bit prejudiced. . . . I do get mad when somebody, like for instance yesterday, I was in court. Every time I went to court I didn't appear in front of judges with my hat on. I know it's a respect thing. I know, but this dude, he saw me all the way across the courtroom. Other people had on their hat and

> everything, and he come up to me and said, "You have to remove that hat." Probably because it was to the back and everybody else had their hat to the front. But he just called me out! I was like "this racist bastard." That's all I'm thinking, and it might not have been something about race, but it comes up every day and it's starting to be a natural thing. And I don't necessarily like to think that every time a White person does something wrong to me, that they're doing it out of being racist but it's like inside of me and there's really no way around it. (June 6th)

I intercept, "But you're picking up on something. So obviously you felt targeted." He confirms and then continues with another story—and another—three in a row, addressing his frustration in race relations. His stories center on un-balanced power relations:

> And that's why we're getting so passionate, because yesterday, Molly [a teacher] was saying that it's just as easy for everybody to get a job. But it's really not, 'cause when you're born in the hood, it's so hard to break out of that damn mentality.

He speaks of a heated discussion I walked into the day before, between one particular female teacher and five or six male students. In the advisory area, I hear raised voices. Soon, more teachers gather around, attempting to put out the flames. The discussion is triggered by a teacher who commented on unemployment disparities in the Black community. Cashious, being the inquisitive, insightful, communicator I have seen him be, was able to articulate his frustration with her comment. The exchange lasted almost an hour, a navigating between color lines. Later on in the interview, Cashious tells me, "I lost all my respect for Molly [the teacher]." His analysis of the situation was that her "whiteness and privilege" caused a disconnect between her and her students. He is shocked to come to that realization.

As the six students and I sit in the focus group the day after the event, they begin to discuss whiteness and privilege. Cashious brings it up and expands his thoughts beyond race to consider the idea of power. "I shouldn't even say the word "White." We

should start saying ‘people with power,’ because sometimes there’s Black people on their team, too.” But then he rearranges this thought:

> We should work on not making it a White and Black thing, though, and a power and ignorant thing, but associate it with what it really is, people with *power*, which tend to be White most the time, so that’s why we always say the White person. But really it is the people with power.

Jason adds “We should watch that video *White Privilege.*”

As a reminder, the school staff has a slightly higher number of White teachers than Black—something that Tommy discusses:

> You know you have a school that is created and run by African Americans with a predominately White teaching staff and mainly African American students. . . . It’s an interesting dynamic in terms how that all works together. . . . We’re all aware of that and we talk about it, but it is what it is, and it’s still interesting and like I said, it manifests itself. . . . And the students see it too. (May 24th)

Teachers and students alike acknowledge that race affects both teaching and learning, and that it is important to be aware of it and talk about it, because it will manifest one way or another. TJ also recognizes that school dynamics are affected by race because the teachers’ race does not reflect the students’ racial demographics:

> I think it’s pretty openly addressed. I mean, it’s a challenge in that sometimes because of credentials and different opportunities, it may appear one way or another with regards to the majority of the licensed teachers are White. I think that sometimes that poses a challenge because then young people, they don’t really see themselves in that capacity, and so . . . that can be a little challenging. But at the same time, it is what it is, like we said, “From the Top to the Bottom from the Bottom to the Top.” Be aware of it and try to acknowledge what it is and give the young people an opportunity to do something about it. . . . It’s really up to them. How are you going to change it? Do you want to go on and become a teacher? You know you have an opportunity to do that? So, other than that, it’s not really an issue . . . because it’s all about giving something positive to the next generation and preparing them to be lifelong learners. So wherever that comes from, I’m with it. (June 5th)

I think about Lisa Delpit’s (2006) book, *Others People’s Children*, when White teachers teach African American students. She explores teachers and learners tensions

created by a lack of racial and cultural familiarity that affect effective teaching. This includes analyzing the language that teachers use to describe their students, and the stereotypes they hold that affect their teaching of African American students. At HSRA, however, with this faculty and student body, it is apparent that race is openly dealt with, especially in relation to how it affects their school. Open communication and dialogue is neither hidden nor under-cover. It is real.

Deez, whom I perceive to be an intellectual beyond his years, doesn't speak of the teaching demographics or of privilege. His conversation centers on the ignored capability that young people have to critically think about it:

> The most I ever talk about race is probably with my friends. When I get home, the last thing I want to talk about is some White guy calling me this or that. When I get home I just want to talk to my mom and dad, make sure they're all right. With my friends, race comes up a lot, too much to even mention. It's not like we even think about us being racist, or them being racist, we are aware of a lot of things. More so than most people give the youth credit for. So, if we see something that happens, we talk about it off the real. (June 5th)

Understanding that African American student think about race "a lot" (Deez, Cashious, Tommy, TJ, Donny) should guide educators to consider creating space for racial reflection and inquisition. Eliminating or limiting avenues of expression eliminates a portion of students' lived experiences. It destroys freedom of expression and critical inquiry, and silences and ignores possible contributions of African American students. Peter, the audio engineering teacher, identifies with this during his interview:

> Anybody who comes in here and says, "Oh, it's a school for Black kids." No doubt! So we have certain things embedded in this culture of students, where the music is a huge part, number one, Hip Hop . . . we had one class that was called "The N Word." Students worked with teachers talking about the history of the N word. So, there's these little things that are in place that address this culture of students that talk about race, and we have a lot of very experienced teachers that *go there* and *talk* about stuff like that . . . this has been ongoing, since the

> beginning. We've had teachers come and go and we've addressed stuff like this over the years with our students, and it's important. (June 3rd)

Peter identifies that the school "goes there," and reinforces the comments I recorded earlier to the effect that students talk a great deal about race with friends, teachers, and family. Peter demonstrates the importance of addressing race at school, because students are already "going there." However, that does not mean that including it is easily implemented, because the complexities of "race talk" (Sidran, 1981), not only represents teacher and student beliefs—it also reflects societies diverse opinions, thoughts, and experiences, each of which affects the other. Yet by keeping race as objective, fails to view these students are process-oriented, it denies the historicity of their upbringing, and their racial meanings they have developed throughout time. As Omi and Winant (1993) state by limiting race to an objective theory, fails to:

> . . . grasp the process-oriented and relational character of racial identity and racial meaning. Second, it denies the historicity and social comprehensiveness of the race concept. And third, it cannot account for the way actors, both individual and collective, have to manage incoherent and conflictual racial meanings and identity in everyday life. (p. 6)

By ignoring race, it denies opportunity for reflection, meaning making, and conversation. The following section shows how students' creative productions refer to race through the expression of their "real selves" (Tommy, May 24th). Sometimes race is mentioned directly—sometimes not.

Expressive Identities: Keepin' It Real

"Keepin' it real" (Donny, June 9th) seems to be a common theme at HSRA. Over and over, I hear students and faculty talk about "keeping it real," or saying "it's real," "it's authentic." I question what that means. I presume they are talking about representing

themselves freely and authentically, unbound by social norms and expectations. It can be about telling their truths, questioning others truths, and creating their solutions. So, I listen to the multiple perspectives that students and faculty present, beginning with Tommy:

> [Projects] look real, they look professional, and they look innovative and new. I think our projects—because we work to give our students as much freedom as possible—I think their true personalities are reflecting in their projects. If it's something really original about them, the projects are going to have a certain point of view that is reflective of who they are, their lives, where they're coming from. There is a certain kind of raw authenticity and realness to it. And if it's something that is kind of collaborative with another organization or with a staff, it's still going to have the content that is necessary, but it's still going to have their spin on it. You're still going to know this is coming from something else, someplace else. I think the best way for me to describe it is I think they look authentic. They're real. (May 24th)

Tommy establishes that students express their individual selves, "reflective of who they are," their lives, and their space, as if faking oneself is not an option. This is partially due to their freedom to be innovative and express themselves as empowered individuals. The relationship between free expression and creativity encourages realness to emerge. It brings to mind bell hooks (1994) and Maxine Greene (1977), who agree that freedom, expression, and creativity are connected. Likewise, TJ says of students' creative productions:

> I think that it's just life experience. Being from the community or the urban neighborhood and what the culture is, the Hip Hop culture. So, I see a lot of that expressed, but also I've seen some more mainstream type of pop. So, there's a spectrum. Because some kids, who are from the hood, growing up in the mostly urban environment you know, they also like rock and roll, they like alternative, they like pop, ballad stuff, so it's hard to peg. (June 5th)

TJ's specific lack of mentioning race aligns the students' creative productions more to life experience and their location in an urban neighborhood. Because of this and the social construction of ghettos in urban places, a racial component is implied (Massey

& Denton, 1993). Hip Hop culture is derived from cities (Dyson, 2001; Hill-Collins, 2006; Ramsey, 2003). Ten years from now, the boundaries may become blurred because of gentrification and Hip Hop's global audience, but TJ recognizes a connection between local, urban neighborhoods, Hip Hop, and student expression. He continues to address however, the idea of not limiting the classification of students' musical interests: He does not relegate African American students to sole appreciation for African American derived music. Their interests may be varied, but their production choice remains dedicated to Hip Hop and popular forms of African American pop.

Peter, too, reiterates this association with race and creative expression: "Well, they're expressing their environment and their lives, their life, and they want to be heard" (June 3rd). Expressing their environment and their lives through their creative productions is multi-dimensional and presents different views according to each person, because what I hear from Peter and see from students is that students "want to be heard," and use their art as a platform to tell stories that express their lived experiences and their "real selves." It is most often associated with racial expression, and their lived realities created in their neighborhoods, but some attempt to not be limited by it. In the following section, I explore how creativity and production reflect their lived worlds, which brings to mind bell hooks (1994), who states, "We make radical creative space which affirms and sustains our subjectivity, which gives us a new location from which to articulate our sense of the world" (p. 209). The students' radical space (re)locates them and gives them the freedom to articulate a sense of their worlds.

Stories Told, Creativity Unfolds

> All my music draws from my experience. Some of it is just of other people's experiences that I know other people will relate, too, and I've seen before. Like sometimes, I gotta tell other people's stories. (Cashious, June 6th)

The freedom to articulate their truths keeps it real as many students use their art to tell unpredictable and revealing stories—from the past and present, with their hopes for the future juxtaposed somewhere between rehearsed, semi-rehearsed, and improvisatory. For example, I meet MJ close to the end of my visit. I hadn't seen him before, but as I walk by, he asks how I'm doing, shakes my hand, and introduces himself. He is curious about this research project, so I give him a quick synopsis and gives me the opportunity to meet a student I haven't met. When we meet the next day, I learn that he is originally from Philly, recently cut off his dreads, has a newborn baby, is working, is close to graduation, and is inspired by all forms of music, mostly Hip Hop. It is also apparent that he believes in God, prays frequently, and believes he is here "to tell stories":

> I'm versatile. I can tell you a story about this and that. For instance, I can make a story like a Kanye West's song, *"*Gold Digger.*"* I can also tell you a story in an Eminem way, and every time, it just comes out. Like what drives me, is that I'll start a rap, and it'll be like I'm trying to get somewhere and then at the end, I'll be like, "Dang, how did I do that? Where'd that story come from?" (June, 4th)

It becomes clear that he explores different musical styles in communicating his story and is inspired by different people. Spontaneously, he begins to perform one of his pieces:

> Get the money focus upon the bonus / the big paper is coming
> Stop joggin and start running/
> Run run run for it / like they called you Forrest
> Be the bear in the forest/do anything for your porridge
> Run run run / it don't matter if you're spittin
> Or if your freedom is what your riskin…

I clap, and he continues:

> "Run run run, Forrest," is taken from Forest Gump and that "do anything for your porridge," is where I get stylish with the rhythm, and meaning. Then I bring in the part of me that's going to give you a speech like a Martin Luther type of thing, to stand up for the Blacks . . . so then I went into the "Run run run. . . . it don't matter if you're spitting, or if your freedom is what you're riskin."

I interpret that "spitting" a rhyme or rap, or running for freedom, can both be liberating, but I appreciate his clarifying that he gets "stylish" with meanings and rhythms through his stories, but he continues:

> I believe people want to hear realness and a story that is real. . . . I represent every kid in poverty, or who had a 504 plan. It's crazy. I have one rap that goes, "Teacher tryna diagnose me. . . . " But I also write fun-loving mood music. . . . But I really write real music. I think I should be a writer or something.

I ask, "Do you write poetry?" He responds confidently:

> Uh huh, yep. When I'm on the bus. I want to come out with a poem book. Tupac inspired me to do that. I write a lot of poems, I want to get one of them published when I get a lot of exposure. I got big dreams, so I document a lot of things.

I gain a deeper understanding that many students appreciate the opportunity to write, produce works of arts, tell their stories, and write stories about what they perceive as real. Many have "big dreams" and work hard to accomplish them. The stories they tell, make, and create, contribute to the becoming of their dreams. Maxine Greene (2011) says, "To look at possibility is to be free" (Retrieved from http://artsandhumanitites.pressible.org/lizhoelzle/symposium).

Early on in this research, I recognize that students at this school are diverse in their experiences, are inquisitive and eager, are excited about their education, and represent themselves as they develop into artists. Cashious helps me to understand this:

> I've seen people come in here, completely ignorant, completely like, "this is just another school. This ain't nothing, this school's not worth anything." But two years later, you see them on that stage, showing their talent, happier than they've ever been, just showing their real self. (June 6th)

I ask what he means by “showing your real self”:

> Like for instance, there’s this student who was going here for three whole years. I never knew this girl had any type of talent. I never knew she was ever a type to talk in front of all these people. But then staff just always encourages everybody to get up on stage and show their talent, whatever they have. So this girl, three years later, she goes up on stage and she starts out with this spoken-word poem. And this poetry is just like, on the next level. You wouldn’t even expect this coming from a high school student, and then she starts singing in the poetry, and that’s what I mean by showing your real self. Like without this school, she probably wouldn’t have ever came out, or felt the courage to do that, to just go up and show her talent in front of everybody. She waited for three whole years till she felt comfortable, but now she’s a beast!”

I think I know who Cashious is talking about because Niles asked me one day “Hey, have you met Lauren?” “No,” I respond, and he continues:

> We went to the state spoken-word contest and we had two students win with perfect scores this year. This young lady had a song she wrote and I was like, “you have to do this as a spoken word piece.” She had never done it before, but two students from here won the entire competition with perfect scores!

He flashes a wide smile: “She won the first round, but then had family business she had to take care of, so she left. I had to call her and tell her she won the semi-finals. So she came back and won the finals!” He laughs, and I become intrigued to meet her.

She arrives at school the same day around 4:30 p.m. Niles introduces us, but I naively did not set up an interview then, thinking I would see her the next day. However, due to the flexible school structure, I eagerly await her arrival for almost a week. When I see her again, she greets me calmly, with a backward-turned baseball cap and a smile that lights up the room. I had gathered bits and pieces of her background throughout my stay. She is the same young lady who came into the community meeting, giving advice to the homeless young man and describing how her mother had kicked her out three years earlier for being gay, so she and her son were currently homeless. I also observed that she

displayed a great deal of respect to her teachers. She is social with fellow students and takes her time at school seriously – but not so seriously that she ever loses her smile. We exchange pleasantries and confirm a time to meet after the weekend.

During the interview, Lauren leans her frame back into her chair, relaxed. With a baseball cap and a loose-fitting flannel striped shirt tucked into a pair of comfortable-looking baggy brown pants, she appears calm. I come to understand that the underlying cause of her award-winning spoken word piece is related to her calm and peaceful demeanor. She tells me that people can make "Something negative into something positive," and continues, "You are better than what is put in front of you." This simple statement seems to be the guiding force of her artistry and the sense of peace she exudes. I ask if she would like to share her piece with me. Seemingly unabashed, she begins to perform her award-winning rap, turned spoken-word:

> When I was seven, my life ended by a man who wanted business /
> He took me in a room, yeah that night I became a woman /
> Hurt and scared at the same time / only my mom was on my mind /
> He told me that if I told, that me and my family would die /
> A talking kid, not silent / Never thought the world was so violent
> My mother never home, and now my private ain't that private /
> Struggling to maintain, after that I never felt the same /
> I grew lost and confused now tell me who's to blame

She pauses, "And then my friend, she sings":

> Take me away / take me away,
> From all the pain / from yesterday
> There's pain in my heart / there's pain in my eyes / there's pain in my soul
> But you will never know / yeah, you will never know

"And I go," she continues,

> Truth hurts / lies kill / Low Key / wake up / it's time to heal
> It's gonna be OK / the lights are dim and [something]…darks [something]
> But the tears will go away, yeah / the tears will go away.

The song ends and she continues without pause, as if she doesn't want me to say anything at that moment:

> I wanted to write a story about that, anyways, because a lot of times when females or males are put in that circumstance, they don't know what to do. It happened to me from when I was seven up to thirteen. At thirteen I got my period, got pregnant, right? So actually I have a son who's seven right now. Yeah, he's my twin, though.

She says it with love in her eyes, and I intersperse a few "um-hums" or head nods in recognition that I am listening, but I remain quiet, allowing her space to express. She continues, "But I got raped by my uncle, and that's who I got pregnant by. But yeah, my son, he's a goof." She rebounds with a loving thought of her son. I become more aware of the interrelation between family, stories, experience, and creative expression, and I think back to the community meeting and ask, "Well, you've got a lot of stories to tell. Did you ever write anything about being gay, and about your mom and all that?"

> You know, it's really just experience-related and the struggles I've been through. . . . I haven't really talked about me being gay or anything like that. Basically I've just talked about me being raped and what I went through. Like [in the lyrics], "My mom never being home and my private really ain't that private." Because something that was supposed to be secure is now ruined. But, it's like a story, 'cause at first I'm telling you my hardship, and then I'm telling you what happened after I had my hardship, then I'm telling you how I'm getting through it.

I think about how self-actualized and confident many of these students are—who are all too often misunderstood or misrepresented in American society. But I refrain from thinking too deeply at this moment and continue listening:

> It gives me closure. It's my own type of closure, like therapeutic. That's how I see it. Like maybe the reason why I was getting, you know what I'm saying [pause] molested for so long, was because I was probably saving another soul.

Incest, rape, and abuse see no color, have no economic boundaries, and are not politically induced. But what is unique is that her image and story are juxtaposed against stereotypes

of deficit-order thinking. Looking at Lauren and her situation from the outside might cause many people to jump to conclude that she is an irresponsible, promiscuous African American teenager, seeking nothing more than governmental assistance for her life. In reality, however, her level of responsibility and focused demeanor are years beyond that of many teenagers her age. In addition, her art form is for self-healing, not for the goal of Hip Hop stardom. In fact, she states, "I'm planning on going into the army. First I'm going to get my bachelor's degree so I can be a social worker. That way, I can counsel people in the army because they have a lot to get off their chest." A wave of sadness rolls over me as I think how she may abandon her art form, but then I consider the multitude of ways she can incorporate it into her future practice, and I am selfishly—silently comforted.

We discuss her creative process and how she has developed as a performer. I ask, "How does your art express who you are as an individual? Your race? Your experience?" She explains that her creativity is not race-induced, it's "just experience in general . . . 'cause I didn't plan on the song being popular . . . I just wrote it for me. Then I showed Niles that I made a song . . . I didn't know that would take it a step further. It just happened." We laugh and she describes the Spoken-Word contest:

> I wasn't even supposed to be in it. . . . I guess somebody that was supposed to be in it kind of let him [Niles] down, so he talked to me. He said, "I want you to do this poetry thing, but I want you to do your song a capella." At first I'm like, "How do I do that?!" I was thinking [he meant] the whole chorus and everything, and I was like . . . 'cause it was just hard doing the whole song by myself. It's a two-people song. I was running out of breath. Then I practiced it a few times and it got better.

Lauren gives us a glimpse into how teachers at HSRA encourage students to express their lived experiences through art. Likewise, she learned about her creative self—although he

is already an informed human being—and explores her own capabilities as she tackles the process of becoming an artist and an experienced performer:

> At first I was kind of scared to come out with my song because it was so personal, ‘cause at first I really only made that song for me. I was never planning on performing it. Like, my cousin got a video of it the first time I was performing. And I was shy, and I forgot the rest of my lyrics because I never performed in front of people before. But then the second time, I got it. The more and more you do it, the more and more you’re comfortable, no matter who you’re in front of. You get more and more comfortable with it.

“Did you become more confident with yourself as you were going along?” I ask.

> Yeah, it made me feel better as a person, because at first you always think, “Am I going to get judged?” But actually, the first and second time I did my song, I had people come to me and be like, “Wow, I was in the same boat.” So it felt good to have somebody that can relate, come talk to me. And the more you get acknowledgement, the more you want to continue doing it.

We are forced to continue our conversation later because it is time for the last performance of the school year and Lauren is slated to perform this song. The students had anxiously been awaiting this last, voluntary, weekly performance opportunity. When we arrive in the cafetorium, it is bustling with activity. A student and a teacher are in the booth, playing popular Hip Hop of the day, while Cashious, the appointed emcee, holds the microphone, periodically talking to a particular student or updating the crowd on the performance time. As the performance gets underway, Cashious’ job is to introduce the performers who, one-by-one, step up on stage and sing their unique, self-created song for the last time of the year. These nine performers exude a sense of pride, and the crowd is happily clapping, encouraging, dancing, and singing along. It is truly a community event, where performers, audience, teachers, and students display little hierarchy. This sense of pride and eagerness to perform indicates to me that students are becoming performers and coming into a deeper connection between performing for an audience and performing for

themselves. What students have experienced is what they express. As Lauren continues later in our resumed interview:

> I had fun, and a little girl was crying. I was like, "What are you crying for? It's OK! I'm twenty now. It happened years ago and I'm not crying over it anymore." But like I say, you never know people's experience at home and stuff. It makes them rethink it.

The desire to express self and lived experience seems related to comfort performing. When a student expresses themselves through lyrics, after time, and after practice, they develop as an artist and a performer. Most of all, for Lauren, she has "turned something negative into something positive."

Stories are expressed through various opportunities. As I mentioned earlier, state and national endorsers have asked the school to create social service campaigns, which, in turn, provide a platform for students to express themselves. The *26 Seconds* State Farm Campaign, "Stay in School," was one of these endeavors. DY, whom I introduced previously as one of the *26 Seconds* Student Ambassadors, describes how his story was selected by State Farm:

> My story was more about why I had dropped out and why I got back in, and in just a minute and thirty seconds, State Farm had liked something about me and my story. They brought cameramen and directors and people from other states, just to come to this school to interview me and go more in-depth with my story. And I remember, one time when we were about to shoot, I was in the studio, I was working on a song, and he was like, "I like that—I want to use that for the project we're doing." I was like "Cool." So that had made me feel really special because in a minute-and-thirty-second video, I had people coming up to get more in-depth with my life, and they heard my music and they liked it. And that was the first song I got paid for, ever, in my life. (June 2nd)

DY realizes that his story is personal, real, appreciated, and recognized by others. This made him feel special and listened to. The song, his story, and his story through the song, reflect his experience. Ultimately, this led to his first paid endeavor. He was happy.

DY also shows that lived experiences evoke feelings that can be expressed through art. Sidran (1998) talks about how one of the strengths of African American musical oral traditions lies in the ability to communicate one's experience and emotional content, "without intellectual analysis" (p. 19). Experience may be expressed by simply telling a story. In this school, students use writing and lyricism as a way to express feelings that derive from lived experience. Deez (June 5th), for example, tells me that musical expression, self, and feelings are related:

> The best way I express myself is through music, cause I don't really talk about my feelings that much unless it's with music. 'Cause you know men, we don't like to sit around and talk about feelings and stuff. So I don't really talk about feelings or emotions except for when I'm writing. That's the only time I really do that.

This suggests that the expression of feelings that have emerged from experience may offer a space of healing—and, as in Lauren's case, a space for reconciliation with self.

One after another, students communicate that their lives are a resource for creativity, as well as a goal, and that their lyrics emerge from the feelings and situations they have lived. It is witnessed that lyrical expression can contribute to an increased level of engagement for students. The focus group touches on this topic for some time. Each student has their own way, their own strength, and their own path to creating lyrics, but most agree that they pull from personal experience:

> I pull mine from personal experience. Some stuff I make up . . . or I'll think about stuff depending on how the beat is, if it's just one of them beats you just feel. Feeling like it should be about this specific subject. But I take stuff that has happened and put it into a song. Make it to where I talk about me. (Jay D, June 5th)

This seems to be a growing theme and is displayed in the focus group. Each student is talkative, freely flowing in thought, and entertaining. More so, however, the unplanned,

informal performances are as revealing as the conversations. They are usually done sitting in chairs and very relaxed, but more importantly, the dynamic in the room is never intimidating. Students are free to comment over one another and contradict or expand, but each performance gives a glimpse into their lives. For example, Jason recognizes, "Well, I'm a critical thinker, so when I write, I try to write stuff that, when you hear me say it, you can see it." Each student adds, "Yeah, um hum," and Khristine emerges in heightened emphasis, "I agree exactly with what he said. I was just going to say that!" "Yeah, you want to paint a picture." Autumn adds while everybody agrees in murmurs with heads nodding and arms waving for emphasis. "Yeah, yep, um hum, Yeah, I agree," and the agreement diminishes to silent nods. Then Khristine adds:

> Like if you were talking about something real, if you know it's real to you and if you're rapping about it . . . you don't want to be just [nonsense syllables]. You want to put feeling into it so everybody lookin' at you, like, "Yeah!"

Everybody adds their own commentary, "We know! Yeah," and Khristine continues, "Like, I know what he's going through—I know what she's going through." Jay D finishes:

> . . . a song that I want to put my everything into, then yeah, I want people to listen to the lyrics and say, "I can see what's going on, I can feel what's going on." And then other times, I put my personality into different songs like goofy ways, or different ways depending on *how I am* as a person. So I got two different ways. It depends on how the beat is, or how I'm feelin' at the time. (June 5th)

Each student seems fairly self-actualized in terms of what inspires them and the purpose for which they create their lyrics. Most want to tell a story that reflects feelings, emotions, and lived experiences, and they all display a confidence in their abilities.

Miles, a couple of days later, during his individual interview, adds to this idea that students share their feelings and experiences through their lyrics. With his somewhat quiet, authoritative, and inspirational demeanor, he adds:

> I think about what the situation is that I'm writing about. Then I just write. Whatever comes, just comes, whatever I'm feeling, whatever the situation is about and then I think about what I've been through. I've been through a *whole* lot, so I can relate to a lot. (June 7th)

He continues, "Music is something I just like to do. It doesn't really come from nowhere, except my feelings." I assume that his feelings are affected by his diverse experiences, which, in turn, affect his music, but as I contemplate this, I observe an intense focus wash across his face as he seems to dig deep into his memory bank. He begins to stare at something across the wall, and without blinking, begins to talk about his life in Chicago, his dislike for the schools there, his troubles with the law, and how he is now able to express his experiences at this school, with teachers, creating songs, producing an album, and becoming a performer. He refers specifically to the *26 Seconds* Stay in School Campaign, for which his life experience proved beneficial, because he drew from it to produce his artwork:

> I'm thinking about the situation I've been through and I just write. . . . The *26 Seconds* thing, though, I almost dropped out of Chicago public school district. I got discouraged, so I wanted to drop out. My family wasn't going to let that happen, but [I thought] "they can't make me [stay in school], though." But I just ditched the idea of dropping out.

He goes right into his verse. This is not a rap, Hip Hop, or reggaeton piece, but a slow ballad highlighting his singing voice, though he later claims to "not like singing":

> Every five seconds a child is born
> And every year, a child gets strong
> Every ten seconds, another child gets (long rest) gone
> So let's make a decision to help them live their lives long

> See we got 26 seconds to make a change
> We got 26 seconds to make a name. Wooooo

I applaud. He smiles and continues, as if he knows what I'm searching for:

> I created that whole 26 Seconds song. They [the teachers] were talking about the 26 Seconds campaign. [It took me] like three days. The first day, I played the piano and made the beat. Then I was practicing it. And on the third day, we went into the studio. I just do it for fun, and it's stuff that I can relate to. This is stuff that I can relate to, so I communicate through music.

Miles touches on his ability to create a "whole" song and to be a producer of art, as well as his multi-modal capabilities as a piano player, beat maker, and producer. He also refers to how his art is a source of negotiation and healing, a living experience. "I'm telling you how I feel, and what's going on in my life at the time, or," he pauses, "it's just how I feel. That's what I do when I'm making music. I just think about what's going on. . . . It depends on what I'm thinking about, or what I'm feeling that day." I nod in acknowledgement and then ask him to expand. "Well, sometimes, I'm thinking different things." Instead of telling me, he raps:

> I said I'm a God fearing, church-going drilla
> It's been a long time since my master called me nigga
> I was risen from the dirt, then raised by a killa… (June 7th)

He stops and humbly states, "It's just something, something I might be thinking about for the day." The day that he wrote these particular lyrics, he was thinking deeply about the contradictions of life.

For Lauren, race has little to do with her expressions, and Miles says he is just expressing his "feelings" and what he's "thinking about." I am reminded of Charlie Parker who states, "Music is your own experience, your thoughts, your wisdom" (Sidran 1981, p. 18). But with Miles, I recognize how race emerges in the conversation without overtly claiming to talk about race. His lyrics reflect his race as he writes about his

"master, calling" him the *n* word. He does not have firsthand experience as a slave, but by placing himself in the context of the song, he identifies with Black experience. His lyrics are associated with his racial identity, not always as a lived experience.

Until this point, race has not been discussed much—it has been more of a matter of experience, sometimes associated with political, economic, and familial backgrounds. Even more, it is about experience and feelings. Donny, the Special Education teacher, clarifies this for me when he shares a song, and says "This is how they feel." As he pushes play on his computer and the bass heavy beat begins, he bobs his head, smiles, and enjoys the song, while he simultaneously searches for his next treasure to share with me. The song begins with a low male voice:

> It's tough to be out here, young, hungry, no money
> I feel like I'm damned if I do, damned if I don't
> My choice is to serve life behind bars, or be stressed out and broke

The song continues for almost three minutes, talking about the lyricist' life situations and frustrations. This is not an example to reinforce a stereotype but to affirm how a space for exploring voice offers students a space to express themselves—racially or otherwise. When the song ends, Donny restates, "Yeah, some feel damned if I do, damned if I don't. They get race and stuff in there, but without saying it" (June 9th). What also seems to be apparent is that students "get race in there" by claiming their location, a space, and a home. A clear distinction between how students wrestle with a racialized experience of historical inequities, and a performance of self, not necessarily named racially.

Experience, Race, and Location

Discussed earlier, the terms "ghetto" or "hood" often conjures a racial connotation. This is partly due to the historical injustices that created these racially

binding locations and partially due to the media's representations of Blackness, which make it difficult to separate notions of race and location. Many authors discuss how African American art forms derive from locations related to the Black experience, i.e., Hip Hop from New York City boroughs, blues from the Black southern experience, and jazz from Chicago, Harlem, Kansas City, and the like (Baraka, 1999; hooks, 2003; Sidran, 1981). In fact, Cashious talks about how his "hood" experience intersects with his race and his art form:

> Just the other day, I kind of got sad because I realized that I've *never* had a White person in my home, and that's kind of crazy to me. I didn't realize that until somebody brought it up. They said that, "Most Black people don't ever have a White friend in their life." This dude said, "I ain't never had a White person in my home." Then I started to think about it, like, how the hell ain't no White person ever [been] brought to my house. . . . I look around and like, there are all these Black people! Where's the diversity? (June 6th)

I ask him to expand his thought, and he continues:

> It goes back. I just feel like we're more segregated than before, 'cause it's not as direct, and straightforward as before. I've been to a suburban school, and I literally was the only Black boy of my kind. There were other Black students there, but they weren't from the same background as me, or same vibe, or the same presence as me. . . . That just threw me all the way off. And my school here, there's a few White kids here, but it's not enough.

"What about in your neighborhood?" I ask. "In my neighborhood, none! None at all! I can walk up and down the block all day and not see a White person. But then again, I'm from Chicago, where I had *never* seen a White person." Cashious raises the idea that separation of location is a form of segregation that affects his exposure to different peoples. He observes the differences between the suburbs and the hood, and his heart-felt connection to the people in these different settings. He also brings up the issue of diverse lived experience across African American peoples, feeling a stronger connection to people of the same "background . . . vibe . . . or presence." This could perhaps be socio-

economically related, skin-tone related, or interest-related, and it is still ambivalent. What is most obvious is his deep understanding that he has had little exposure to other races.

This is captured in Cashious' creative productivity, because he acknowledges that race, experience, and location have influenced his art:

> Race affects my music a lot for me. 'Cause coming from the hood and just being African American or Black, whatever we call it, there's a lot of different views that you pick up coming from the street life. It's like this: I feel like it's easier to be street smart and learn how to be book smart, than to be book smart and learn how to be street smart. I feel like that street smart, it has a lot of impact on my music. It helped my music out in a way that I feel like the book smart wouldn't have been able to. Because there's certain things that I say in my lyrics that I'm like, "Man, I wonder if the average 18-year-old in America would know this type of stuff." And I learned all this stuff off the streets. So, the race has a lot to do with that. (June 6th)

TJ, too, echoes Cashious' thoughts about the relevance between location and creative production. During his interview, TJ says:

> Yeah, to some degree you know the way society is segregated and neighborhoods are brought together in communities. They're not totally eclectic or diversified. So, if you have an enclave of black culture, then they're going to have that experience, and it's going to manifest through their music and their artistic expression. So, yeah, it's dependent upon where you're coming from and where you've been. (June 5th)

He continues to describe the idea that past historical musical movements reflect location, time, and lived experience:

> That's what Hip Hop has done over the time, especially when gangsta rap emerged. It was really a product of the time and the community that was happening in South Central Los Angeles, so young people who really reflected that lifestyle and that community, you know it was catchy and people related to it, and they could feel the *real*. They could feel the *realness* of it so they wanted to experience the music.

Even though a direct quote on race did not enter the conversation, TJ reiterates that Hip Hop music often expresses the "realness" of lived experience, and he implies a racial component that is often associated with location. [Gangsta] Hip Hop music was a

reflection of "that lifestyle and that community." Anyone familiar with South Central Los Angeles and its racial demographics, the history of Rodney King, and the 1992 Los Angeles riots, it brings to mind the enclave of black culture that is affected by a racialized society. The expression of this experience is manifested through the music. This school seems no different.

Throughout my time at HSRA, I encounter Jay D who is one of many students who have plenty of stories to tell. During his interview he moves fluidly between race, experience, location, and his art. Today, as we sit in the interview, his smile, like those of many other students, seems genuine and honest:

> There's things that have been going on in my life that affected me, because a lot of people have told me that I wasn't going to be anything at all. You know, I've heard it from teachers, and some relatives I was growing up with. "You ain't gonna be nothing, you're just going to be one of those little *hood* dudes just for the rest of your life." This song that I'm creating now is called, "Starting from Nothing," and it's from the model where a lot of people in my position and maybe in different positions, from where they started from nothing. And it's just to inspire. You know? I moved from Chicago and I didn't have nothing at all, and I didn't have much family, and I didn't really have anything when I left Chicago because I wanted to get away from all the gang stuff that was going on. And I rose from all of that, and then going to jail. Well, I've been to jail like four or five times already and it was before I hit 20. (June 2nd)

I understand that his lyrics represent his lived experiences and his race, associated with being from the "hood":

> When we moved here, it was my five other siblings and just my mom. And it was just terrible, because it was like a new start. I was just out on the streets all the time. I was never in school, but when I finally got back to my senses, around seventeen, I went back to school and been getting back to my stuff again. I dropped out again, then went to jail, got out again, went right back to jail. I was in there for a whole year. And then when I finally had my son, that kind of changed my life. So this song is purposefully made for people like me, that struggled from having *nothing* at all and then they rose to the top. And now the people that said "I wasn't going to be anything," they're looking up and saying, "Man, I shouldn't have said that, you know?" And I'm at the top of my life right now. I love it. Everything is falling into place. If I could see one of those people who said I

> "wasn't going to be nothing," I would shake their hand and laugh, "Do you know where I'm at right now? Let me show you where I'm at right now." . . . Don't let people tell you, you can and can't do this.

Jay D talks about the interrelationship between emotions, location, and experience, with no direct reference to race. What is most striking, however, is that he talks about how his past educational experiences affected his educational engagement, but in this space and time, in this school, he has found a place to succeed and rise to "the top." Again, Jay D is an example of how students wrestle with a racialized system that affects their lives, yet perform an expressiveness of self. A Black expressiveness emerges as he says "this song is purposefully made for people like me, that struggled from having *nothing* at all and then they rose to the top." Ideas about race coexist, there's a performing of a critical blackness, while simultaneously he wrestles with the elicit codifications of race, being critical of the box others have him limited to. As Kevin Quashi (2009) states, "[Black] expressiveness is essentially public as a counter to marginalization" (p. 7). Although expressiveness is not limited for this purpose; for counter marginalization, it can serve this role.

Jay D also participated in the focus group of June 5th, where this subject comes up again. The interactive, talkative focus group participants also perform for each other sporadically, whenever they feel like they're ready. Jason has been quiet for a while now, and Khristine notices. She asks, with a smile and a laugh, "What you doing over there? You're sitting over there, all quiet?" Jason laughs and admits in his southern drawl, "I been over here tryin' to figure out what I finna do for y'all." Everybody laughs, understanding that sometimes performance can be revealing, personal, and intimate**.** Jay D asks, "You got a lot a hood stuff going on?" as if it might not be appropriate to share

during school time, and Jason admits, "Well, I got a lot of hood stuff going on in my head, but OK":

> I said, I got my socks fitted and I'm half way cocked off
> Been waiting for something to pop off
> Chillin' on my steps, smokin on my pipe
> Got my city on my back . . . on the strap
> We in Minnesota . . . we can take it way past rap.
> I'm in a full blown hood and ain't up to no good
> Nigga tie you to a tree
> Have you starving in the woods
> I said, I gotta kill or be killed mentality
> I finna had a whole rap gang . . . not obsolete
> Only the hottest niggas around all fought for the . . .
> Shuttin the game down.

Jay D is first to acknowledge Jason and says with a smile, "OK. That's *serious*. Yeah, yeah, that's that *Chicago*!" he says emphatically. I believe that Jay D is referring to the message of the song, placing himself in the hood, killing, smoking, waiting for things to "pop off." And I add, "Nice. I heard your present and then you went back to history." Jason agrees with a question, "Yeah, like, 'tie you to the tree?" "Yeah, what made you go there?" I ask. He clarifies:

> I mean, everything I write, the majority of the time, I mostly try to place everything off of what I've been through. What I live, what I see, or what I'm going through at the time. So everything has to deal with something personal. It *all* has to do with something personal. That one was more of like me explaining what it's like in my family. What it means to be like where I grew up with, *my* environment around me . . . but also . . . from like personal stuff that has happened, or the stuff that goes on in the world . . . like everything from back in the history of what my ancestors had to go through to what's going on now.

We all nod, acknowledging Jason's intellect, and I realize that even though "hood stuff" is inspired by experience, Jason's lyrics also expand into the historical, to "stuff that goes on in the world . . . what my ancestors had to go through . . . what's going on now." He

too sees the historically racialized contexts that has affected his life, and performs through his uniquely created lyrics that represent himself.

In addition to this, with most the male interviewees, conversation about race and expression naturally led to their experiences with the judicial system and police harassment. No female mentioned any form of harassment, but most male students talked about "racial profiling" (Donny, Deez, Cashious, Miles).

Police and Racial Profiling

I refer to Cameron McCarthy and Warren Crichlow (1993) who believe:

> Discourses over racial inequality in education cannot be meaningfully separated from issues such as police brutality in African American and Latino neighborhoods. . . . We come to recognize that examining race relations is critical not simply for an understanding of social life as it is expressed in the margins of industrial society, but ultimately for an understanding of life as it is expressed in its very dynamic center. (pp. xxi)

Expressing through their lyrics, inequitable race relations as racialized experiences is appreciated. It is not noticed to be used as a platform for rebellion most often associated with lyrics of the "PO"—police officers (Deez)—or in the rebellious nature believed true of the rap associated with the late '80s, i.e., N.W.A's (1988) "Fuck tha Police." Instead, freedom of expression coupled with thinking and questioning, is evident.

Independently student-produced songs and some curricula offer opportunities for students to express their experiences with racial profiling. They discuss unwarranted infractions for spitting on the sidewalk, underage smoking, jay walking, or simply for being in cars with friends. And each time tickets were given or misdemeanor arrests were

made, they felt targeted. Deez (June, 5th) says, "Yeah, I do a song about my personal experience about being harassed":

> I had an altercation with a police officer one day. I spit on the ground and he wrote me a ticket for it. . . . I just felt like it was just harassment at that time. I talked to my mom and my dad about it, and it was just like, a lot of PO do tend to racial profile. If you got dreads, if you are a dark African American young man, they tend to look at you more. It's basically how it's always been. I don't think racism is ever going to change, but you can't dwell on it and you just gotta look forward and do what you gotta do to better yourself and your community.

As I sit later with Tommy (May 24th), he brings up how systemic racism affects the students:

> Any little thing can bring it [race] up . . . but it's not omnipresent and overt, so you don't feel like you're constantly dealing with it and it's constantly spoken about. Yet, if something were to happen, our students would be quick to point it out. They are conscious of who they are racially; they are conscious of oppression and discrimination that's systemic in society.

Students are aware of race, talk about it, and reflect on their experiences with oppression and discrimination. But for these students, conversation turns mostly to interactions with the police. For example, one of the 20 or so songs that Donny shares with me is "about police brutality." He continues, "They love this one, you know, because they live that all the time. I've had a lot of students talk about that they really connected to it." I ask, "How did you come up with the topic?"

> Well, we were talking about police brutalities and stories and how it relates to rap and Hip Hop, and we talked a lot about it. We listened to Dougie Freshe's style for a bit, and they *all* said they've been harassed by the police. And I said, "OK, well let's tell the story about what happened to you," because we were trying to address every single area of this prison industrial complex.

He plays the cooled beat song as I listen to the words. When it ends he shares:

> I like his verse because he [the student] says, "You see the police, I see the cops." I like when he's rhyming, you know? He says, "Do you see the man?" He's talking about the walk signal you know? A cop gave him a ticket for jaywalking . . . "You see the man? I see the Man? You see the Man? I see the Man?"

He laughs as he mimics the lyrics, and I see a double message: “the Man,” used as slang for an oppressive system, and “the man” as the walk signal. The song continues:

> Middle finger to the cops
> Cops keep on harassing me . . .
> He gives me back my license
> Who’s that looking through my window?
> Tryin to search me for . . .
> Why? Because I’m Black?

It is apparent that students are experiencing racial profiling and reflecting on it. However, due to the “positive messages” of student representation Tommy chooses to release, fewer songs of this topic are accessible to the public. They remain in Donny’s hands. Although the students seem to appreciate the opportunity to express and explore topics that are relevant to them, the message is partially controlled, and I hear nothing about whether the students care that it is.

Ethnicity

Race is addressed through references to racism and sometimes through lived experience. Because racial identity is not always easily or simply defined by skin color, cultural heritage, and ethnic affiliations, some staff and students challenge racial categorization. Ethnic affiliation, for example, is most often addressed by students and faculty who have a mixed ethnic background. Peter tells me, “To talk about race, the challenge of different ethnicities, you’ve got that constantly happening” (June 9th). This reminds me of Womack (2010), who says that because of her “exotic” look, she came to despise having to define her Black identity to other people (p. 67). Having to answer the question, “What are you?” diminishes her ability to be able to claim “Black.” (p. 72). She

finds value in identifying with her Black heritage while simultaneously embracing her mixed heritage. Some students would agree—others would not.

Miles has a mixed ethnic experience. He grew up in the United States but his mother is originally from Jamaica. He recognizes that his Jamaican heritage and his American experience have affected his music and creativity:

> When I was little, I usually hear people rapping all the time. But my cousin and my granddad are calypso artists. There's a lot of reggae and calypso in my family. We're from Jamaica . . . that's probably why I love Trap music so much, because I mix reggae with Hip Hop. People don't really notice it, but if they were from our culture, they will know . . . Hip Hop, when you're listening to it, you're listening to reggae, because Hip Hop is from the reggae culture. But you have to know that to get it, to understand it. . . . People are like, "You're so good at Trap." I'm cold at trap beats 'cause I'm from Jamaica and that's all I listen to, and all my family listens to. So, put two and two together. (June 7th)

Miles talks about how his Jamaican culture and upbringing in the United States affect his musical understandings and productivity. But then, as with many other students, a definitive claim that race has affected his music becomes blurred, and he states, "I don't think race. I don't really care about all that extra. Music is music to me" (June 7th). Music is what he cares about in relation to race. This is not a revolutionary finding, but it should remind music educators that students bring their lives into the classrooms.

DY echoes Miles in saying that he doesn't think about race—it doesn't really matter to him. DY, the son of a Black father and a White mother, states, "My music reflects me…my past, my activities, and my beliefs. My music does not reflect race" (June 2nd). He continues, "I may put a couple bars in, just so my listeners know who I am in every way, in all forms, but I don't say it like it's a big deal at all, because to me, race isn't a big deal." Although he might choose to "put in a few bars" to let people know about his mixed racial heritage, he also talks about how he didn't like living in the

suburbs and didn't want to "end up like them." So I wonder where his belief that "race is not a big deal" stems from, because he acknowledges that he felt a lot more racism out in the suburbs. He has lived difference as being an outsider, and continues to think of race in terms of being affected by racism, yet distances himself from race by denying being racist on his part:

> I've got Black friends, I got White friends, I got Mexican friends, Asian friends. What matters to me is your personality and your character and how you carry yourself. The color of your skin doesn't matter to me. . . . I feel like if there was a word for race . . . the word should be after where you're from. My race would be Midwest American . . . but then they just narrowed it down to the skin color.

DY acknowledges difference and has experienced racism in other educational settings. But he rarely expresses his mixed racial identity in his lyrics and says that "skin color doesn't matter." In this, he reflects what Christopher Warren (2012) identifies: Some that some scholars believe that "colorblindness represents a constitutional commitment to ignore the actual superiority and dominance of the 'White race. Colorblindness is, after all, a defect of vision consisting in an ability to discern certain differences that really do exist" (p. 201). While DY does not ignore that race and racism have affected his life, he also claims that race does not matter to him—that it is only a skin color. But this does not negate the possibility that he can experience plural worlds, while performing, exploring, and acting with characteristics that belong to Black speech, or "Black talk"—a term that refers to the aesthetics of Black stylistic patters of communication (Sidran, 1981; Smithermann, 1977). Nor does it negate the possibility that DY has embodied styles of Black performance. He affiliates himself with both his Black and his White heritage, and claims to have been influenced by his Black family members and community when he lived in Wisconsin. He also tells me that he has been influenced by Hip Hop, which is

apparent when I watch how his musicality imitates Hip Hop. I see him outside the school with his headphones on, practicing his raps, "spitting" his freestyles with friends, and writing mostly rap songs. His physical gestures imitate Hip Hop and embody the aesthetics of Black musical performance, i.e., communicative, communal, testimonial, emotive, "giving significance on how something is said or done than to what is said and done" (Gay & Baber, 1987, p. 5). He does this even as he appreciates other types of music. As Charles Gordone (1969) writes (as cited in Gay & Baber, 1987):

> There is more to being Black than is physically apparent . . . being Black is a philosophy of being; a style of life; a way of looking at reality; a process of making meaning out of experience; a spirituality that leads to aesthetic endurance; and a means of giving structure, focus, and expression to a particular set of cultural values. (p. 5)

Performing identities can manifest in mixed lived experiences and intertwine with a belief in the unimportance of racism, while acknowledging that racism exists.

Niles the teacher, too, believes that race has less of an impact on his life than his Caribbean culture does:

> I don't even look at race. I look at culture. . . . I'm Afro Caribbean, my Mom's from Africa by way of America, my Dad's from Barbados. . . . I don't look at race at all, honestly . . . to say Black . . . that's just a surface. What's beneath the surface? What's beneath the surface is a culture. That's what runs deep. But I'm confident in being a man, 'cause I know my people come from royalty . . . so knowing that, embodying that, makes me not a victim. So, I don't really focus on color. . . . Race is just a color and that's a social construct to me. . . . But, then, looking at most the students around here, they are like a reflection of me, culturally, and I come from like the same type of background. . . . You know? I come from poverty . . . and I grew up in predominantly the same type of neighborhood. (June 8th)

Niles doesn't look at race, but rather culture, playing with fluid constructions of race, gender, class, heritage, and lived experiences. He attributes this to his non-racist attitude and his diverse friends and experiences. However, the message becomes murky when he

says that the students are a "reflection" of him. In fact, only a few students come from a mixed heritage, so it seems that he might be talking more about class than skin color when he says, "I come from the same type of background. . . . I come from poverty." But he uses the word "culturally" to define this class. He recognizes race in relation to lived experience with poverty, and yet he doesn't focus on race as an obstacle in life, believing that his strong knowledge of his African-Caribbean heritage helps to keep him from taking on a "victim" mentality. His recognizes a racialized experience of inequity but chooses not to focus on it, because to him, his performance of race is less important than culture. For him, this perhaps allows him access to multiple worlds, friendships, and spaces.

Struggles

Although students do not always talk outright about race, Donny tells me that it manifests in their lyrics about "life struggles," or "struggling to lift oneself up" (June 9th):

> A lot of times they'll use struggle to represent race and stuff. They'll just say, "struggle," to represent the whole system. And *we* know what they're talking about. I don't think they do it on purpose all the time, but that's just what I've noticed.

He confirms that "struggle" often represents race, and when he says, "we know what they're talking about," I assume he is talking about the Black teachers at the school, which makes me consider how often teachers of other races are in/effective in understanding someone else's lived experience, especially when it comes to race. I think about how difficult it may be for teachers to legitimatize students' work if they cannot relate to it. But I don't have time to contemplate this in great detail and it slips through my mind as he continues:

> But when it comes to race, they just kind of talk about the conditions, you know. These are systematic stuff you know, like teen homelessness, how the family is, like in the song "Diaspora," or "Abolitionist." All of those are systematic things in there [in the students' songs]. Everything's connected to race, but it's more like, "Lift myself up, we can overcome this." And, "It's a struggle, but we're better than that, so you know, we gotta fix some things." (June 9th)

An acknowledgment of struggles and "systemic stuff" affects the students' expressions. During his interview, Miles also illustrates this in a song he performs for me:

> Hold up, money never been my motivation
> So I'm not doing it for some checks
> But all I want to do is get famous
> Now my mind is stronger than I have ever been
> The struggles I've raced through do not compare to all the things I did
> My plan is to work my way up, there ain't no coming down
> All my life I been getting high and I'm stuck up on the sky
> My only way down is to go to school
> So getting my education is my second move. (June 8th)

Miles talks about how his mind is strong, partially due to the struggles he has lived. He talks about pulling himself up and making something out of his life with an education. Each theme in the verse reinforces Donny's point: that he believes racial expression does not always explicitly identify race, yet a racialized experience is expressed through the text.

Students may or may not acknowledge outright that their African American race affects their lives, but most represent it in their artwork, whether or not they express a racial self in other forms—i.e., performance or Black talk—defined earlier as the aesthetics of Black speech and communication (Sidran, 1981; Smithermann, 1977). Language and popular Black music often coexist in representing "Blackness," from the inception of jazz through the blues and into rock music (Gay & Baber, 1987; Quashie, 2009). For this reason, Black talk and African American-derived art forms are interrelated, and imitate the historical development of the Black community.

Language

Researchers have studied language in the African American Diaspora and its influence on African American music (Dimitriadis, 2001, Jones, 1968; Sidran. 1981). Most of them agree that African American musical linguistics derive from African contributions, including the use of parables, double meanings, and storytelling. In addition, they identify African tonal influences in vocals as having influenced African American music by contributing to the creation of a non-westernized and unique sound (Jones, 1968). Black speech, talk, rhythm, and vocals do not disconnect from race in African American musical forms (Jones, 1968; Ramsey 2003; Sidran, 1981). Hip Hop music is no different. The language, stories, parables, rhythmic flow, poetry, and sometimes the improvisatory nature of the music in free-style, reflect earlier African American musical traditions, from field hollers through Hip Hop. Any musical analysis of the lyrical and rhythmic inflections in these students' original songs will reflect these influences. Western music characteristics are also apparent however, especially in youth of African American heritage, whose performing identities have been influenced by linguistic and musical influences that are currently nestled in TV stations like MTV and BET. TJ eloquently talks about this:

> I think the song "Grass is Greener" expresses their race a lot, because they're bringing their lingo and culture into it. In that way, they are expressing themselves, but they're flipping the rhyme. Flipping the phrases, they're using parables, you know, the double montage. They're really being creative about it, you know? I think that that is really like straight up Hip Hop because it has kind of like the neo soul sound with the straight Hip Hop. So yeah, I see that language is used a lot. And I've seen it go through different developments, where sometimes you just get a lot of kids that are more hardcore Hip Hop, gangster rap, or conscious rap, or neo soul type of Hip Hop, so it fluctuates. It goes through different phases. (June 7th)

This reminds me of *Black Talk* (1981) by Ben Sidran: "The semantic value of tonal significance is thus carried over into instrumental playing. The 'significant tone' is closely related…to *meaning* what you say" (p. 6). Students' vocalization, combined with how they create meaning, is significant—whether it's through hardcore Hip Hop, neo-soul, spoken word, poetry, or the like. Flipping words around or using parables in songs are examples of how one can create meaning within lyrics.

I come across a particular spoken-word piece on the HSRA's *YouTube* channel. I am particularly fond of how this female student, whom I never met, manipulates words and rhyme, provides references to past historical African American icons, creates double meanings in her message, refers to her life experiences, and creates parables in her poetry. There is no music accompaniment, simply voice. The following piece was created for the program on safe sex and HIV prevention:

WORDS OF WISDOM
Written by: Check Yo Self Crew

A bullet in a barrel
A gun inside the hand
I hope you understand
How Russian roulette and unsafe sex can often go hand in hand
Just like life, a game so real
Are we willing to risk everything for a measly cheap thrill
I'm going to put something in your ear so let me tickle your mind
Condoms isn't an invention for youth, only half the time
On the package it should read
In **bold letters** and great **big text**
Use this item every time you think about having sex
Or I wish it'd read
Don't believe the hype, everything can be felt through a condom if you use this item right
Let's take a moment of silence and remember Eric Eazy-E Wright
He mustn't not known much about condoms, unsafe sex took his life
I'ma tell you a bit about Eazy because he surely reap what he sow
All we heard him rap about was money, bitches and hoes
Please excuse my French and I know to my words there is no limit

These words create a message and I truly hope you get it
Snoop Dog is packing condoms and his homeboys is packin too
Cause in Dog eat Dog land, the dog count already knew
In the words of Dr. Dre and our favorite homeboy Snoop
She could be earning a man, learning a man, and at the same time burnin a man
Ladies please understand that brothers be learning, earning and burnin too.
And the only way we won't get burnt is if we be cautious about the things we do.
Now ladies, Tupac told us exactly why they be callin us "bitch"
He said because we feel we be stuck in this game, we continuously digging a ditch
Now girls, these fellas be watching, noting everything we do
I don't care if you wear a size 4 or if you suit a size 22
Ladies and Gentlemen protect yourself 'cause it's a matter of life and death
And because of the lack of protecting ones selves
Brothers and Sisters are peacefully at rest
I told you that's a message and if you agree then don't deny
If you're going to play a game of Russian roulette
You better be prepared to die
(http://Jay D.youtube.com/watch?v=c3rHL2AA9bQ)

In regard to this poem, I am personally struck with the poetic verses, rhymes, and flow that incorporate a historical context and was created to serve a greater purpose as a social awareness campaign. I reflect on how Sidran (1981) believes that the *meaning* is the "significant tone," but that the fluidity, rhythm, and rhyme reflect African American Dialect (p. 6).

Turn-up Music

Students' lyrics can sometimes conflict with school norms and rules. Whether popular music is appropriate in school, but more specifically whether Hip Hop music is appropriate for the school context has been debated (Low, 2009). However, it has not been debated at HSRA because Hip Hop is what created this school. What has been debated is what language is appropriate.

For example, DY (June 2nd) speaks openly about his experience with homelessness, dropping out of school, and his life experiences in general, from which he

draws most of his lyrics. But he continues, "A lot of my music is just turn-up music. It's just hangin' with the brothers." Turn-up Music is music for hanging around. I gain a deeper understanding of what DY means as the interviews progresses: Turn-up music is not necessarily the music for revolution, or of social critique, or promoting world peace – it is primarily for fun. This raises the common debate about the use of profanity in Hip Hop, giving cause for teachers to use this crux as a form of silencing Black youth contribution and privileging other forms of music instead (Low, 2010). But Jay D describes how language is a tool to express self. He specifically connects the use of profanity as a lived experience coming from the hood, and claims that freedom of linguistic expression is a form of creativity often eliminated from the school context. Students wrestle with school-imposed rules that conflict with some of popular music's socialized norms, including profanity:

> By us having to switch up our words, it's not our song fully! I mean it's ours, but it's not ours fully because we can't use the words and stuff that we feel at that time for that song. . . . 'Cause if we're making the song, we should be able to put our own emotions and words—everything into that song. It's our song, so no one else should have a say-so in it. . . . Some of the words I try not to swear or use slang. . . . It's not that I want to swear, it's just that I'm used to hearing it in my songs, in my type of music I like to listen to. . . . So I wish we had more leeway on what type of language and words we can use in our songs. (June 2nd)

Most students have musically productive lives outside of the school and realize that their total freedom is somewhat limited within school boundaries. A disconnect exists between music production in school contexts and the influence of popular culture that is, as Jay D says, "just what I listen to." Cashious, too, acknowledges this:

> Race does have a lot to do with it because I make my music for everybody. But the type of music, like [edited title], a turn-up song, mostly all the Black people gonna love that song. . . . I mainly made it for my family in the hood. . . . 'Cause they're always saying, "Why don't you make a turn-up song? Why don't you

> make a club song?" That's for my Black people, my Black folks, my brothers in the struggle. (June 6th)

One day, I observe this frustration play out between Peter, the recording engineer teacher, and Cassey. They are alone in a recording studio, doing final edits on the song she created. As we listen and watch Peter performs his magic on the boards, she smiles, "I love this! Oh, listen to that. I love it!" (June 4th). Her excitement is infectious, but if we as music educators pride ourselves in teaching students great pitch and tone, it can take the joy out of watching a student explore, and appreciate himself or herself. I begin to question what we consider to be more statistically viable: a perfectly pitched song or an empowering moment for a student? What can be more successful than watching a student write, sing, collaborate, produce and edit an entire piece—and feel such satisfaction from the product? But then Cassey uses the *n* word in her song, and Peter has to edit it out. Cassey responds, "Man, it doesn't say what I really want it to say! Why do we have to take it out?" Peter secretly admits that he wishes he didn't have to censor words, but he also realizes that it protects both the image of the school and the students. It also perhaps challenges them to expand their vocabulary and expressive capabilities:

> So, no, that part of the art, where you have to *filter* things and change this word, that sucks . . . that's the most painful part of all this because I know that if *anything* I could do to develop a better process, where maybe there's some of that [swearing], that could happen. Then maybe they could learn that they don't necessarily have to use that language to convey. But you know that's artistry, that's learning, that takes time. You can't expect them to get that right away if that's where they're at. (June 6th)

Although more than half of the interviewees communicate frustration with the censoring of language that portrays a true representation of "how I feel" (Jay D, June 2nd), profanity and all, Tommy, as the administrator, is more concerned about how they

are, "represented to the public" (Tommy, May 24th). It seems to be a debate that will continue.

I ask Cashious to share something he is working on, and wonder what type of song he will choose to share. Rather than singing one of his turn-up songs, he chooses a song inspired by something he has lived through: "This song is called 'Lonely People,' and I'd rather just spit the lyrics first":

> This is for the Black boy, the poor man, those kids living up in poverty
> Ain't no man ever fathered me, care for me, guided me, provide for me
> So if the world don't even got no love for them
> I don't even need no apologies
> Or about going to jail, or one of these killers poppin me
> Quite a tail because I'm lost as well
> Got a smile on my face, can't nobody tell
> Keep telling myself that it will get better
> So I hold my head like the seventh letter
>
> It's ironic how lonely people end up together
> When I was five, my grandma knew I had something special
> I'mma win if we're talking technicalities
> 'Cause these dudes lost, with no originality
> I ain't trying to make a friend, I trying to make a salary
> Then in the end they gonna try to play me over man
> I just want greatness, try to be the next Hover
> Crash sofas on Oprah
> And pull up to the awards via chauffeur
> via chauffeur…

I laugh and smile at his intimate story and his goals for the future, and he continues:

> What inspired me to write that song was that I was really just releasing my feelings. Every bar in that song is just something I experienced and something I have been through in my life. . . . And I feel like a lot of other Black adolescents can relate to that. 'Cause there's a lot of us growing up without fathers, a lot of us out here feeling like we just so lonely and we just feelin like there's no one for us. So, that's what I made that song for, all the lonely people . . . and yeah, I said, it's ironic how all the lonely people end up together. I really feel like that. The lonely people do end up together.

He reflects on the lyrical content of this song, as compared to his turn-up song:

> These days, they don't even appreciate songs like that. They really don't. The "New Slaves" song [Kanye West, 2013], everybody say that's illuminati. How is that illuminati? You drop a deep song, it's illuminati, you're a devil worshipper… But as soon as you drop a "shake that booty" song, the whole neighborhood wants to listen to you, the whole hood.

Kanye West's "New Slaves" (2013), ignited debate in the social media and received opinions and commentary ranging from, "the best song of 2013" to "controversial," "shit," and "illuminati." Cashious, however, displays an understanding of the plight that many African American musical artists undergo when breaking cultural stereotypes. Instead of continuing to reinforce negative connotations of African American people, artists who situate themselves as social historians, or—perhaps unintentionally—social advocates, face scrutiny. Socially conscious music, along with music designed for entertainment (which is often considered to reinforce social stereotypes of promiscuity, drugs, sex, and violence) contribute equally to society. The stereotypical African American prototype and the African American social advocate are juxtaposed images. Both musical trajectories play a social role, contradictory and necessary. Yet, regardless of musical purpose, Deez says that for him, music needs to be authentically represented, a lived experience: "Basically, [musicians need to] follow through with everything you portray on your album. If you're saying you going to do something in your lyrics, you gotta do it for real. You can't just talk about something and not be about it" (June 5th).

This informs my research on the authenticity of representation and how it is considered necessary to the artistic expression of lived experience. Similarly, L. R. Gordon (2005) believed that, the "valorization of adolescence" is often linked to an "authentic" representation of black culture (p. 14). In other words, the value, or status, or commodity price rises as an "authentic" representation is expressed. This challenges the

idea of authentic Black representation, while it concurrently exemplifies how social media often codifies artists into stereotypical Black life. The opportunity to create a new authentic story is weakened. Tommy discusses how this conflict arises at HSRA:

> They do, they do express their identities. . . . I think it's almost impossible for them *not* to, and it's hard for us to control it . . . to make it appropriate. So you know, we're always working through that to find that balance . . . those things manifest themselves in sometimes graphic ways, and that's OK, you know. There may be some real message when it is graphic that we need to hear . . . but when we're working on a particular project, we challenge our students to figure out how to do that without it being gratuitously anything. In other words, have it have a purpose and a meaning beyond just a reflection, that may not serve the purpose of what it is we are trying to create as an end product.

Drawing a line between total freedom of expression that "may have some real message" challenges "students to figure out . . . how to have a purpose and meaning beyond just a reflection [of self]." Tommy acknowledges that a freedom of expression is valid, but tackles the hard question of educating young people about when, where, and for what purpose such freedom is acceptable and even intellectually appropriate:

> I think that's a great thing for a young person to learn how to do. But they're strong personalities and we're not trying to kill that. We're just trying to show our young people how to take control of themselves and manage it, and manipulate it within themselves, not *us* manipulating it. But them knowing how to say "OK, in this context, I'm bringing myself into it in this way." I think we all do that in various ways, but it's still always a conflict, too, because we're always questioning our own authenticity and our own sense of being real.

Switching between "turn-up music" and music that is appropriate for school is a recognized issue and is still debated. Both seem to have an influence on student productions, and Peter acknowledges that the school incorporates Hip Hop music, "because the students you're trying to educate, you gotta speak their language. You gotta involve their world (June 3rd).

Written and Freestyle

Freestyle (improvisatory) and written lyrical expression are equally viable tools for creative expression. Freestyle, also known as "chipper," is most often improvisatory and created according to context of situation and surroundings. It was traditionally often executed in forms of "battling" an opponent, attempting to outdo or outsmart a verbal battle. It can also be executed as a solo or in an ensemble, as improvisation. Due to the free flowing thought and the quick response needed in freestyle, some students gravitate towards written lyrical production. Others participate in both. They are both linguistically creative, but they require different skills. This is similar to jazz musicians who build their skills in improvisation, gaining a vocabulary from which to grow and explore. Some "jazzers" are more comfortable working off written notations and improvising only periodically, while others seek the open canvas to improvise. Not speaking directly about freestyle or written lyrics, but more so about cultivating themselves as artists, lyrically and creatively, Niles says:

> We have a lot of great writers here. A lot of students delve into their lifestyle, as far as where they've been, where they're going, where they're at. We do have some that kind of go along with the trends, that's where me being a teacher—an artist—comes in, to show them what their potential is as an artist. You don't have to be like anybody else; you can be yourself . . . and they cultivate themselves as artists. So, when they speak about who they are, it really brings them out the most. So there are just a lot of different avenues they go down creatively, not only lyrically.

Students explore multiple modalities, but lyrical production remains a significant portion of their creative expression. And, like improvisation in jazz, "You don't have to be like anybody else; you can be yourself." This is liberating for some students and scary for others, but both freestyle and written lyrics are appreciated. Students themselves distinguish their abilities between the two styles, classifying themselves as able to

freestyle or not. In addition, how they come up with their lyrics differ. Some say that their lyrics are sparked by a beat, while others say their lyrics are created from life circumstances, feelings, and observations. Freestyle is situational.

I observed plenty of students who wrote their lyrics and fewer who freestyle. Lauren makes this distinction:

> I don't know how I be putting in words, just when it comes, it comes because a lot of times, it *doesn't.* But then when it does, just take advantage of it, hurry up and write it down. 'Cause I'm not a rapper. You know, rappers, they're like, "Just give me a beat." But I can't do that, I have to be in the moment. So that's why I don't call myself a rapper. (June 3rd)

Lauren claims she lacks the freestyle ability to come up with ideas simply based on a beat. She seems to be a more pre-meditated lyrical creator who takes time to think out her thoughts. As in jazz, some may not have created a vocabulary, riffs, or pre-meditated lyrics to build from.

The *Hip Hop History and the Arts* course that Niles teaches traditionally ends with a freestyle cipher time. I allude to this observation at the beginning of Chapter I, as students have not yet chosen a song for their new CD. Class is almost over and cipher time begins. This is a time for students to create spontaneous rhymes with rhythm. The students gather around in a circle in the corner of the room while a student picks a beat from the closest tabletop computer to bop, feel, and sway. I watch their eyes and minds focus, ready for where their hearts and minds will take them. It's obvious they're beginning to create verses silently in their heads, ready to *spit* a spontaneous act of improvisation. Niles begins the round by holding up an iPad to record and introduces, "The next one of mic is OC Crazy," and the bass-ridden beat plays on.

Student 1:

Yeah, yeah, can you vision the land full of all white sand . . .
Full of holiness ignorance is bliss, while we live like this
Man, I pray and I wish, sometimes I wish I were rich
Dig a body a ditch, why they like that to us, we just don't freeze up
Run with gangsters, no cheaters, they call me the teacher, never sat on the Bleacher,
I cried a bucket of tears, I'm still remaining right here
Never dodging no bullet, you know we got a stray bullet

He finishes and the group laughs with encouragement and pat him on the back. The next student immediately begins, building on the previous verse:

Student 2:

I guess you can say he ended with a bang
I'm trying to get it, letting my dreads hang
My presence here ain't no need to explain
I'm taking off like a plane. . . .

Group: Laughs emerge with encouraging applause as the next student begins.

Student 3:

Uh huh. Check. You gotta keep it real, keep it real,
If you're not, whatcha doin wit yourself
Gotta climb from the bottom to the top
Give it all cause I wanna be the best
If I don't I'm a fall over again, start over again, when will it end
Climbing up a ladder, one that never ends
Struggling in this life where we gladly sit
Starting it out so natural good when this life begin
(TRIPLE TIME) Triple the, triple the, triplen the time of the limit that we were given to live

This time, laughter engulfs the room in recognition of the triple-time play with words and rhythm. Keeping with the improvisatory form of freestyle, the next student responds to the triple time:

Next student:

Triple in triple en tripeilumdem time
Ever since 13, a young man on his own
I'm just trying to be a king, I'm trying to sit on a throne
All you be sayin he got some written scripts
He be spitting scripts he got more verses than the reverend

> Watch where you steppin, all my homies it's crazy what we livin in the after side of poverty, famine people not eatin 'cause of. . . .

Another student jumps right in in response to the previous student:

Student 4:

> Yeah, people not eatin, people steady thieving, I'm coming in man, I'm loud like I'm shrieking, see me on the television, see me every weekend. . . .

The group laughs affectionately. Everybody is attentive and engaged.

The cipher continues for 20 minutes, ending with the students stating their stage names, websites, and any other form of promotion. Niles ends by telling the i-Pad, "This is *Hip- Hop History in the Arts Class*. Till next time."

Deez captivated me by his freestyle abilities in the *Hip Hop History and the Arts* course, so I ask him during his interview to talk about his process of freestyling or writing, he tells me:

> I like rapping, the sense of sitting down and writing music depending on the way I feel. I like freestyling too, but freestyling is more spontaneous, words just come to your head. You see a word that word rhymes with this one, but it's still true feeling that comes from the heart. When you write, you got time to rethink and grasp every word that you're writing. So I like writing. I like vocally spiting lyrics, I like to hear my voice. (June 5th)

Lauren and Deez present a clear distinction between freestyle and written lyrics, and there is no bias in relation to which is better.

Deez is the only student who describes how his lyrical expression is connected to his reading:

> So I read books, just reading alone helps boost your vocabulary, so when you got a bigger vocabulary, you can express yourself more rather than when you have a limited vocabulary. So my lyrics, they basically come from my knowledge and my emotions.

He believes that his extensive vocabulary assists him in his lyrical production, and yet he is not disconnected from his experiences and emotions:

> Honestly, I can write a song in like ten minutes and it can be good quality. Sometimes I wrote better songs when it was fast; it just depends on how I feel. If somebody's on the track with me, I feel more entitled to just come hard, because I don't like being that guy that doesn't have that verse that everybody's like, "Oh, I like that verse!" So, if it's somebody else on that track, I'm going to naturally come hard, but if it's just me, I'm just going to do my own thing.

Whether rhymes are rehearsed or written, Deez feels pushed to bring his best when working with a team. He ends the conversation by explaining how he likes to create his lyrics:

> I like trap beats, but I won't come at it as a simple way of writing. I like a trap beat, to spit something lyrical over it, just 'cause I like the way the beat sounds. Or it depends on how I feel. . . . It's not one way I go about things when I'm rapping. If I'm feeling this type of emotion, then that's what it's going to portray on my paper, and I'm just going to write. It's like when I rap. If I rap and I don't have no subject at all, I'll basically talk about my lyrics, talk about un-lyrical people, anything when I have no set subject, I just go. But if you say, "OK, rap about a box," I'll rap about a box. It's like, nowadays rappers ain't in tune with God. They don't thank God enough for what they got and that's a lot of talent, and when you're not in touch with yourself, it just takes away the emotion and you really feeling about what you're rapping.

So I put two and two together. "OK, so freestyle something about spiritual." "All right." He takes about six seconds to collect his thoughts as he focuses his eyes on something across the room. His body begins to move to no audible beat, swaying slightly up and down. As he begins, his right hand periodically waves up and down emphasizing particular words of importance, to him.

> I pray to God often, so I often feel spiritual
> I open a Bible and I read it and I feel critical
> I gotta pay attention, did I forget to mention
> That I feel a type of way when I writing that's my extension
> Progression is in focus and I'm trying to move currently
> I gotta do what I gotta do ain't nobody stopping me
> The only person that can judge me is probably God
> I don't need a jury I run this till I get tired
> So crazy when I think so crazy when I spit
> That other people can't think how crazy it'll get
> I'm like a construction worker 'cause I'm looking for that fix

> Of that knowledge and I'm striving to go to college
> Often I think spiritual
> I hope you do the same
> 'Cause life in this society is far from a game
> When I rap I feel warmness in my body no flame
> 'Cause when I rap it portrays what I really feel is pain

"You know? Something like that," he concludes as he re-focuses on me with a smile. And I think about how nice it is to watch him create, explore, improvise, and produce a piece of art that reflects him. It takes a certain skill to spontaneously create like that, and it is one that I have never acquired, so I clap in admiration and support, and ask him about how he has grown as an artist.

> I feel like I've grown because when I make music now, I gotta *think*. I can't just rap. When I'm freestyling, you can say just a lot of things that could slide 'cause it's just spontaneous, off the mind, you can't always correct yourself. But when you rap, writing, you got time to sit there and think. So how I've grown is I can't just rap about anything anymore. When I rap, it's got to have meaning to it and a mature kind of way. I feel like I've grown in a sense of I don't rush what I'm doing anymore. I take my time.

I understand that he wishes to be more refined, more meaningful in lyrics, and to make a quality piece of art rather than to rush one. At the same time, he continues to distinguish between freestyle and written lyrics as different ways to arrive at a final product.

During other interviews, too, distinctions between ciphering (freestyle) and written lyrics often arose. For example, DY (June 2nd) talks about how he has explored with both, and says that one cannot always be "taught" how to rap—that learning comes from doing, trying, and being offered a space to explore. This is true for any form of music education. Simply having a space to explore, do, and try, is valuable:

> I cipher in the car with my friends. That's the only time I really freestyle. . . . I study music, I listen. I hear their tone, the way they rap, and I study their flow, their lyrics, what they're saying, what they rhyme with, what and how it can rhyme with something else. Their transitions between rhymes. I used to ask my Dad; he rapped. I remember when I was thirteen, I said, "Teach me how to rap."

> He was like, "I can't teach you how to rap, it's something you gotta do yourself." So I never really got that, or understood how people did it. It always seemed so complex to me. I started writing poetry in Milwaukee and that's where it really started from. I wrote a poem and it just went so perfectly to a beat, and I was like, "So, that's how they do it." And after I came here, that was when I really started paying attention.

DY begins with the idea that he freestyles with his friends; it's a community event, not always a solo event. He doesn't claim to be good or bad at it, and does not attach self-worth to any expectation—he simply does it. He also touches on the idea of just doing it is important in order to get better at it. Practice and experimentation have improved his technique, as had his intent focus on listening to rappers, lyricists, and musicians. He is learning and becoming a producer of art through experimentation with creativity, language, music, and self.

The focus group participants (June 5th) have a lengthy discussion about different approaches that students use for their lyrics. Most of them recognize that they are exploring multiple artistic avenues, such as writing, poetry, rapping engineers, producers, beat makers, and singers. Jason claims a dual fealty to rap and poetry, while Dean says that "Rap, engineering . . . and poetry" are his methods of artistry. Autumn has "written a couple of songs, and sings," but visual arts are her passion. Jay D claims writing as an interest, among other explorations, and Khristine says "I'm a rapper, a singer . . . I like to engineer, and I know how to make beats, and I like to write poetry sometimes." Autumn reminds her, "Well, if you write your raps, you write poetry, pretty much." Jay D smiles and tells Khristine "Well, I guess you're a poet, then." "Yeah, I guess so," she agrees as she nods and shrugs her shoulders. We laugh.

Throughout the focus group, students have had an opportunity to "spit" something, either freestyle or previously written. When students feel comfortable, they

take their turn—some more than others, some more than twice. When Dean is ready, he perks up and interrupts a conversation. It makes no difference to us, since everybody is here to share. He says, "OK, I got one."

> All the time it feel this world is against me
> All this negative things tryin to grappling to get me
> But I must not do anything that's lower than thee
> Because I must protect myself and my entities
> We'll see, enter all these energies
> At the same time I feel like the end of me
> Put my hand on the trigger take the life of the next man
> Just think of the day that I could be the next victim
> I can't go, I pray to God to take my soul
> 'cause I'm on the road to riches but I need the right road
> I keep my faith on, my game face on, I'm a soul survivor, No Akon.

As usual, everybody shows their appreciation, smiling and clapping. I've never once seen them discourage or make fun of another. I ask Dean if his piece was freestyle or written.

> I wrote that like four years ago. But I haven't performed it. I never put it on anything, 'cause like, when I wrote that I was at a place in my life…I was like, "Let me just write this song." I just came out of nowhere. Like when I write music, I've got my notebook and I write my whole sixteen [bars]. I'll write a half rap, go into the studio and rap the other, but when I tried to rap the other half, something else came to my head. So I went back to the notebook and wrote it down.

I ask, "Is that how you do most of your writing?" And he replies:

> Lately, I haven't been even writing full raps lately. . . . Like half is written and the rest is freestyle. So it's like you sing two times in one, but everybody thinks it's a whole written rap, but it's not.

Autumn adds:

> To be lyrical, you really do have to write because it's hard to be lyrical. Unless you're Tupac and freestyle, you know? So . . . I mean it's good to freestyle but like if a song is meaningful, I think it deserves more time and if you just come up with something off of the top of your head, it's not going to be as deep.

And Khristine says:

> I'm normally a freestyler. I freestyle, but if it's something I got to sit down and listen to, it's hard for me to write sometimes. But once I sit there and I think. And I think. And I think and I think and I think [she laughs], it'll come to me.

Autumn continues:

> The majority of freestyle anyways is written kind of . . . you just come up with bars in your head. Just because you wrote it down does not mean you ain't freestyle it, it's just remembered freestyle.

Jason interjects, "Where I'm Going" is written like that. It was written fast. I wrote it in like 12 minutes." Jay D adds, "That's what *I'm* talking about."

This conversation demonstrates that both the written and the oral improvisatory aspects of Hip Hop are vital expressive tools to the students, and are not worlds apart. They understand that not everybody is able to attain a deep, meaningful song in freestyle as easily as Tupac did, and for Autumn, writing lyrics is easier for her. Sidran (1981) identified differences between Westernized beliefs on literacy and oral traditions:

> The oral man will be misunderstood by the literate man—a failure to communicate—but that literate man will fail to recognize that an attempt at communication may not be recognized as acts of communication at all and might be totally disregarded. (p. 4)

This reminds me of music education that fails to recognize these students who express themselves through these non-westernized traditional ways of knowing. The students at HSRA do not see hierarchical distinctions—they recognize written and oral communication to be equally viable, especially when it provides a platform for expression. In addition, the fact that they choose to explore multiple art forms signifies that these students also enjoy being multi-literate and multi-modal.

Pedagogy, Race, and Freedom of Creative Expression

As the conversation turns to more specific teaching and learning opportunities that encourage literacy and racial expression, I begin to address the first two research questions: (1) how does HSRA foster purposeful exploration of racial identity? What institutional structures inhibit identity development and well-being? (2) How does creativity foster the exploration and development of learner identity? How do African American students—assuming they do—express their racial identity through their creative work?

How students express themselves through lyrics may make a difference to their sense of engagement and productivity. Schools can create opportunities for lyrical expression in various ways. For instance, Tommy (May 24th) names the multiple ways in which students have a chance to explore and express topics related to race:

> You know, when given an opportunity to do something lyrically, race definitely comes out . . . but you know we're constantly doing something around race, like we have looked at the *WIRE* series, or things like *Eyes on the Prize*—things that have a racial story to tell, particularly in this country. And we'll have projects that offer opportunity, because we have this thing called Urban Music . . . is where some of the most raw music comes . . . it's more just about self-expression . . . and keeping it what it is . . . in terms of where that expression and consciousness around race you will hear. And when they do, you realize it's just under the surface because they're so creative with it. You *have* to imagine that it's always been there . . . because it's too genuine and thoughtful. Or if we're just having a conversation around politics and whether it's race or not, you know we have an open microphone during our community meeting sometimes, we're talking about various stuff.

Teachers' endeavor and HSRA's unique curriculum encourage and create space for students to tap into their creativity, which can be sparked by current events or the analysis of historical ones. Peter reinforces this: "So, when you start talking about race to me . . .

it's who we are. As a school, we're kind of integrated, so of course we talk about it, we have classes, we express through music you know" (June 3rd).

For example, the school creates a community event to discuss a current event that affects the United States, which gives students an opportunity to produce a product that expresses a strong opinion about the event. DY tells me that the school jumped on a chance to produce art that reflected students' thoughts on the February 26, 2012, killing of Trayvon Martin:

> When something happens around the country or locally that has something to do with race—for example, the Trayvon Martin incident—then, being a majority African American school, we jump on it! We were doing fundraisers, we made a song about it that was on the radio, a whole public announcement type of song. It was a big deal. (June 2nd)

He continues, "Or like when the tornado hit, we wrote songs about it. It affected the Black community hard." The tornado is brought up numerous times during my stay, mostly in the context of how the city rebuilt the wealthier section of town, but I realize that DY is describing how current events and critical analysis of those events are used as teachable moments—and allow students to creatively express their reactions.

Donny expands on this, saying that students have to be "taught" how to think critically about race, and to critically question systemic systems that affect students' racial experience:

> They have a hard time expressing race apart from anger. So they don't like to really talk about it because the way that it makes them feel inside. They don't know how to think about it critically. They have to be *taught* that, and that's something I try to do, you know. We're not teaching these things for you to get mad. We're trying to help you understand the past so you can navigate your future. They just get mad like that and they don't like feeling mad. 'Cause most of them are artists, and artists you know, they're a little bit loving. They *love* everybody you know. So they're like, don't make me *mad* at people. (June 9th)

Donny considers an important aspect of education is that students need to be taught and guided how to think critically about race—even when they're a "little bit loving." He also believes that students need to know history in order to help guide their future, which emphasizes the importance of including race as an influential matter when teaching. And, since Donny observes that students most often express race through anger, helping students to think critically is a vital tool of education. He continues, "But they don't like to talk about their anger. They don't [talk about it], cause they can't do it without anger. So it has to be taught:

> Racism in the U.S. goes back so far, you have to go back to slavery and they hate going back there, because they feel embarrassed about it, and it's humiliating to them. And/or they just don't feel any connection what so ever. So it's hard to discuss.

I think how often I have experienced students disassociating themselves from anything African or the African continent because it is "hard to go there, and discuss." The historical context of their beings can be "humiliating" to them. This of course is not true for all, because, as Autumn indicates during the focus group, "I think that's what this school should do more of. They should do more Black history" (June 5th).

However, the relation between anger and critical inquiry reveal itself during the focus group. The conversation lasts for over 20 minutes. First, students identify that racism exists—then anger emerges:

> Dean: There's still a lot of racism going on in the world.
>
> Cashious: There ain't no blind eye to it.
>
> Dean: Like racism. Everybody thought that like, slavery is over. Just because they aren't enslaving Black people, doesn't mean there isn't still racism going on.
>
> Cashious: . . . Man, I don't even want to be talking about it. I be getting *mad.* I don't want to be getting *mad* today. I don't know who to be *mad* at, man.

Everybody laughs and some clap. Then the group talks about the movies *Django Unchained*, and *Roots.* They perceive *Roots* as a meaningful educational movie, and consider *Django* racist.

> Jason: People knew what *Django* was going to be about yet they still went to go see it.
>
> Cashious: I didn't know it was going to be what it was; I thought it was about slavery. Nobody told me that you were going to have Leonardo DiCaprio say nigga like over *2,000 times!*
>
> Cashious: (gets angry again) See, I'm getting mad again! I can't help but get mad!

However, many songs that students create in Donny's *Urban Music* class express race through a sense of racial pride, rather than anger. Donny continues:

> I think they express race more like racial pride, too, through music. I have one song here that is a racial pride thing. They were studying an Egyptian word, "Maat" . . . and it's about resilience, you know, continuing on this fight as a race. And then this one [song] right here is "Sunday Dinner," a racial thing. It's a part of our culture, and so they discuss it in ways like that. "Single Parent," like a lot of them are mad at their dads.

He takes a moment to reflect while he gives me an audio tour of "Maat," "Sunday Dinner," and "Single Parent," each collaboratively created by students. Some sing the verses, others do the chorus, and more do the audio production. Each song displays a sense of pride. And as I finish the interview with Donny, he shares another song and says, "Here's one, 'Say it Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud.'" It's not quite like James Brown's infamous piece, but it forces me to contemplate its complexity, which incorporates a critical inquiry into their past, reflects their musical and lived present, and exhibits knowledge of the legendary James Brown as a man, musician, and lyricist. The interaction between history, facts, and dialogue reconnect the present to the past.

According to Niles, he describes his *Hip Hop History and the Arts* class as "acting, spoken word, creative drawing, Hip Hop, you know? It's like a big Jambalaya, and the students can reach towards anything that will bring their creativity out" (June 8th). This *anything creative* includes space for racial expression to emerge, often without direct teaching from Niles.

The CD that Niles has been working on all semester is a hot topic at the school, partly due to the large number of students who participate in it, and partly due to the fact that the final production of the video and CD release at the end of the school year. One song that particularly caught my attention is Lauren's "Essence of Woman." Both Niles and Lauren talk about it in their separate interviews, and I become intrigued. Niles says:

> On the *Hip Hop History and the Arts* program, there is a song called *Essence of Woman.* I always wanted a song with *all* females rapping, because it's a misconception that females don't write their own rhymes, you know, that a woman needs somebody to help them write. We have some excellent female emcees in this school who write themselves, straight from the heart. Who are great, who I think can go toe to toe with any dude. I truly feel that way—that gut. So, I got some of the best ones in the school to go into the studio with me. . . . I told them to write about who they are as women, a song that gives women empowerment but they're speaking from a women's perspective. And they went to almost a type of euphoric type of world with it. Like how poetic and potent it was. It made me think of people like Coretta Scott King or Sojourner Truth, you know, or Mother Theresa. It made me think of all the greatest women throughout time. (June 8th)

In this particular example, freedom of expression is less race-related and more gender-specific, but illustrates how teachers identify students' strengths and push them to expand their current capabilities. I ask, "So the girls came up with most the lyrics? And Niles confirms:

> Yeah, the girls came up with the lyrics for that song. . . . Well, I come up with the topic and then they write from what the topic is. . . . I really wanted it to be an album that has different ways of expressions from different forms of emotions.

> . . . I think that the most relative thing that you can do with your art is be honest. That's what draws people in.

Niles' pride as a teacher is evident when students perform their strengths, create, produce, and express their honest emotions through original material.

The girls, however, bring race into the lyrics. Lauren happily talks about how she created a song that touches a little bit on race, but more on the unity of race. "It's called 'Essence of Woman,' she says. I respond, "I heard about that song. Niles is really proud of it," and Lauren performs it for me:

> Lady goddess of every color
> Together we can discover
> A new world out there
> No time for the undercover
> You're beautiful inside and out
> When it rains it soon starts to drought
> Labeled as materialistic, don't listen to them hypocrites
> Our love is intimate, magnificent
> God's creation, heaven-sent
> To be or not to be, uh
> Do you get the picture yet?
> Truth hurts, lies are naked, no time for hurt,
> you got to shake it off
> Stand tall, we came to win it all. (June 3rd)

I clap and smile. She smiles back and tells me what prompted her lyrics:

> Niles was like, "Where did you get the lady goddess of every color?" I didn't want to be racist and be like, Black, White. So, if I was talking about all females, I could be like, "lady goddess of every color." So I just put it that way. And then, "labeled as materialistic system, don't listen to them hypocrites," 'cause everybody always got something to say about females, how we're no good, or you're bitches, shit like that. But "don't listen to them hypocrites," 'cause a lot of times people will talk about you. . . .

Lauren's addresses race in her composition, not as a message of rebellion, not as a message of specifically Black pride, and not as a message of racial injustice, but in terms

of the equality of races for women, with an attached message about societies' propensity to disempower women of all colors.

These examples suggest that each teacher incorporates race into their teaching and learning in different ways. Some are more direct, offering space where production is "deliberately created to move people to critical awareness, to a sense of moral agency, and to conscious engagement with the world" (Greene, 1977, p. 2). Others create a space in which teaching and pedagogy around race is more inferred, allowing for students to explore their individuality—whether or not it is specifically race related, as in Niles' course. Most often, students express race even if it is not teacher-driven. What is certain is that race is addressed and expressed.

Race Still Matters

As race is addressed and expressed, it seems that students and teachers experience a racial wide-awakeness. Borrowing from both Ytasha Womack (2010) and Maxine Greene (1977), I first refer to Womack, who states, "Post Black is about who we are becoming . . . about the collective consciousness that would rather ignore change than embrace it. . . . It is about the new diversity in a community that prides itself on self-definition" (p. 22-23). For Womack, a "becoming" is change. It is about diversity and re-definition. Post-Black for this research is metaphorical, because one cannot remove race from their being. Historical inequities have created a racialized society. Yet performance of race can be ever fluid and critical of the box one is placed in. A collective consciousness that ignores change eliminates the possibility of redefining what is Black, because it hides old beliefs, descriptions, and storylines that eliminate possibilities. As

Black communities change and evolve; and as social, political, economic, and judicial policies continue to affect our communities, i.e., social class structures, building a larger middle class, and skin tone castings, change is inevitable, and the way that all members of a society view, talk about, and act on race, will change.

Second, I would like to borrow from Maxine Greene (1977): "To make things harder for people meant awakening them to their freedom . . . aware of their personal mode of existence, their responsibility as individuals in a changing and problematic world." An awakening to one's freedom lived through a "conscious engagement with the world" (p. 119)—a world that is changing and often problematic. To Womack, this requires a new becoming—one in which awareness of a personal mode of existence does not ignore change but embraces it. It is a deliberate move toward critical awareness (Greene). For Womack, a "becoming" is change. It is about critical awareness, diversity, and a re-definition. If we view this in relation to race—for HSRA, for these students, and for these teachers—race talk has diverse meanings. Yet students can be "awaken[ed] to their freedom . . . aware of their personal mode of existence." Awakening to one's existence and actualizing a freedom that accompanies this awakeness can be liberating. Womack (2010) writes:

> I too am African American . . . reflect the seedling of another simmering uprising with the African American community as it's forced to redefine itself or face cultural implosion. I too, am African American defines the changing landscape of today's African American population—and includes those who don't fit into the nation's collective definition of itself, who don't fit into the African American regime's idea of itself, who aren't represented by politicians or preachers, don't match the Hip Hop-infected media stereotypes nor the enhanced images of ridiculous wealth, stupendous crimes, or destitute poverty flashed on the evening news. They are a new breed with different ideals and a variety of lifestyles and interests that go unnoticed, untapped, and unwanted by the so-called defenders of the black identity because, in shifting the paradigm, these outliers shift the power to define what being African American truly is. (p. 27)

It is possible to reconsider what it means to be African American, how one is supposed to act, talk, and look. But Womack (2012) expresses that "The new diversity in African American life doesn't neatly fit into America's image box. It doesn't neatly fit into black America's box either" (p. 11). How is this a collective consciousness? Can there be an awakeness when racial affiliation is questioned from both Black and White America? I question Womack, yet I understand the larger message put forth: that a one-size does not fit all.

As I reflect on the diversity of students' experiences with race, I begin with two particular students' stark different comments. Cashious who states, "The thing that makes me mad is that other races sometimes think that race isn't a factor anymore and it doesn't matter, that everything is equal." (Focus Group, June 5th); and Cassey states, "No, race [doesn't] have nothing, I don't think about that. It doesn't matter, it doesn't affect my life." These diverse responses in thought, perception, and experience are not neatly packaged. Tommy makes a comment that reflects a post-racial awakeness. The term "post-racial" emerged unprompted by me.

> I think one of the most interesting things is that [race] is not addressed [here]. I think that there is something to this kind of post-racial generation and I think that, um, it probably also has something to do with the region we're in. There isn't a lot of racial diversity here and it doesn't really manifest itself in very overt ways here like it does in other parts of the country. . . . So, I think it takes a step back and um . . . it's not prominent, *but* it's always under the surface. And it's not far under the surface.

Tommy believes that race is not addressed perhaps because of the regional lack of racial diversity; therefore, it doesn't come up a lot. Yet, he tells me, "It's not prominent, but always under the surface" making me question the dichotomy between a covert racialized experience and on overt racial expression. I saw students address race consistently in

their art, it might just be that race is brought up and expressed in forms not overtly revolutionary or resistance-oriented. I keep in mind that Tommy grew up in the ‘60s and ‘70s:

> I grew up with a clear sense of racial history and identity. Um, went through various phases of political thought. You know, I attended Howard, I flared with the All African Peoples’ Revolutionary Party for period. . . . And I’m a fan of Kwame Ture [Stokely Charmichael] and others, and spent time thinking about the whole other political spectrum. (May 24th)

He continues to talk about how he’s had conversations with Clarence Thomas and Wynton Marsalis, and worked on one of the Kennedy’s campaign. In comparison to his experience and age, other students have not had the same opportunities. He continues to tell me that he wants his students to be free:

> It boils down to these young people who also don’t all look like me, but who’s humanity I share with *all*. . . . It’s about having them learn how to have a kind of life that I believe is the most rich type of life, and that’s when you’re free to be who you are.

Even though he has had a wide range of experiences in race relations and politics, it is all about freedom for him, and helping students learn how to develop themselves, no matter what race a student is. Race can affect one’s experience in life, he tells me, and he wants students to know:

> . . . how to advocate for yourself and the things you need, you know how to collaborate with your neighbors . . . in the community. . . . To build things and create things for yourself . . . you *understand* who you are racially, you understand your history, but you do that ultimately so that you’re a better human being. It’s not about division it’s about understanding.

He believes it to be important for student to know how to advocate for oneself, and to understand the history of race relations. Yet race relations have evolved throughout time, with each era: pre slavery, post slavery, civil rights, and affirmative action. For this reason, not denying that racism exists, Tommy attempts to teach the students to:

> Know how to spot the racist, and don't *over* respond to them. . . . If you can easily just move them out the way and continue to do the things that you do. . . . It's about how to constantly be moving forward and creating the best life that they can for themselves. (May 24th)

Tommy moves from not discussing race much, due to location or lack of diversity, to acknowledging that it's always under the surface. Finally, he acknowledges that students will most likely experience racism, but will hopefully develop skills that help them to respond and create a "best life" for themselves.

I believe the focus group's conversations around race lead naturally to a multitude of diverse thoughts as well, as students jump from one idea to another. The themes that arise center on ethnicity, the debate about "who's Blacker than who," the use of "ignorant and intelligent" language, the idea of fitting into two worlds. Cashious, Khristine, Autumn, Dean, Jason, Jay D, and I sit in this rather small, blue room. Our meeting was meant to last for about 60 minutes, but almost two hours later, we're still talking. We begin talking again about how race is addressed in school. Cashious leads:

> I went to this all-White school and it used to piss me off. We had this whole class about angry Black adolescents and I'm the *only Black boy* in the class. The *only Black boy* in the class, talking about how *angry* Black adolescents are, and how we're so angry against the world.

Dean follows with, "I would have left the class!" And Cashious adds,

> I did leave the class! The thing is, when I left the class the teacher, she already knew what was up 'cause she wanted to do the class especially for *me!* 'Cause she wasn't racist, 'cause she was so sad how the school treated me, 'cause every day I came to school, there was a problem with the principal. 'Cause the principal saying, "They fear me, all the students fear me." So she was sad for me. But I don't know *why* she thought it would be a good idea to have a class on angry Black adolescents, because all these White kids raising their hands, saying, "Well, I think Black people do this-that 'cause they're just crazy" kind of thing, or, "Their parents aren't around."
>
> Khristine: That wasn't even appropriate, because in a Black school, we don't have a class about why *White* people do this, and why *White* people do that.

I begin to see how students perceive acts of racism by teachers: They think critically think about how race is being taught about, perceived, and represented in acts of teaching. Cashious and Khristine both recognize that race is a factor in their learning environment, and have lived through acts of racial "fear." Their reactions are anger. Peter tells me that teachers, unintentionally or intentionally, can create scenarios where students are "brought there" (June 6th) to question racism and racist acts.

Autumn brings up Black History Month: "It was tough going through Black history month at a White school." The students clamor in agreement: "Oh yeah," raising their hands and bobbing their heads up and down. Autumn continues:

> This White person tried to teach me about my culture. It's not just that, but if somebody comes to you and is like, "Well when your ancestors…" and you know? You might not be from America, you might be from Germany!
>
> Cashious: You just hit it on the point. "Your ancestors!"
>
> Everyone together, and one over another, repeats, "Your ancestors were this, your ancestors were that."
>
> Autumn: We had to watch the slavery thing. These videos were just uncomfortable.
>
> Khristine: Like you said, I was in the school with all White people and some Asians, and the teacher said, "Today we're going to watch *Roots*." I was like, "What you mean we gonna watch *Roots*?" And then a student said later, "Remember they got Kunta Kente and they chocked him, remember? That was funny," and I was like . . . "Nooo!"
>
> Cashious: That's why I hate that movie *Django*. It was bogus as hell.
>
> Jay D: That was a bomb-ass movie.
>
> Jason: That was no bomb-ass movie.
>
> Autumn: That's why I'm not going to go see it.

> Cashious: It's a must-see movie, but the movie messed up. They talk about Black people walk around calling each other niggas. But we ain't doing it to intentionally to hurt each other! Jamie Fox and Samuel Jackson, they bogus as hell for making that movie. Why set us back that far? Come on, I just came from the South. That is racist White folks' favorite movie right now. They're all laughing and cracking up. "Come here, nigger, come here you little . . . " But at the end, who suffered the most? . . . the Black man.

The students continue to disagree, questioning each other's opinions as to what was good, bad, racist, and whose fault it is for over 10 minutes. I appreciate the students' openness and honesty about ideas ranging from Black/White relations, learning about one's history, and thinking about how racism plays out in their lives, in school, and in social media. They are aware that racist acts exist and they have ideas, thoughts, and opinions, not to be ignored.

I ask a hard question on purpose, wanting them to express the different viewpoints on whether race affects their creative work. "How do you express yourselves as African Americans?"

> Everyone breathes an elongated: "Oohh" or "hummmm" in contemplation.
>
> Autumn: It's hard to do that, especially being young and being Black.
>
> Khristine: I don't really know how.
>
> Jay D: Yeah. Shhhhh.
>
> Khristine: Because I . . .
>
> Jay D: You don't think about it, really.

I see the students attempting to answer the question as the conversation begins to evolve.

> Khristine: Like, my color, I think just like everybody goes through something at the end of the day. Some people say African Americans got it the hardest. No, 'cause I know a lot of Caucasians that got problems. My family's friends with them, some stay with my Auntie. So I don't just say, "Well, I got a problem cause I'm Black."

"No, that's…" They all agree.

Khristine continues:

> I know a lot of people like that, though. They'[re] like, "I can't do this cause I'm Black. I can't get a job, I can't 'cause I'm Black." No, it's because of how all y'alls attitude is. I know *intelligent, smart* Black people. TJ [the school director] to me is one of the smartest people I have met. I really don't know how to comment on that question.

Students find it difficult to articulate how they express themselves as African Americans, which might be an indication of Tommy's post-racial comment about how "it's always present, always under the surface." Yet, asking an Asian student how they express themselves as Asian is just as difficult to answer, and asking a White student how they express themselves as White is likewise difficult. Instead, students seem to be aligning the African American race to societal standards, more as a social positioning in life that is attached to an experience, as displayed by the comment that "everybody goes through hardship." Or they express race through understanding their intelligence as exemplified by Khristine's comment. Or expressions of race are thought of through the work ethic that dictates one's *success* or *failure*. But no mention of racial expression is explored through characteristics of speech, musical preference, and or performing. Jay D continues, "Race is always going to be a challenge because everybody is entitled to their own ideas. Everybody's always gonna have something to say about race, and race is always going to be a situational problem." The fact that Jay D sees race as a problem that varies according to one's lived situation, gives an inclination that race is viewed through the lens of conflict and difference, not necessarily as a lived expression. I return to Womack who believes it is difficult to categorize racial experience in any one way because it does not fit into a neat box.

The focus group is an example of diverse thoughts about race, expression, and position. The students' conversation ranges from the social stratification of African American people to language and the ability to move fluidly through racial, entrepreneurial, and educational settings. Autumn continues:

> I think it's hard being, you know, it sucks being Black, *and* being a woman. We're already pegged with two strikes against us. 'Cause us Black women, we were held down twice as hard. But I really do think it's like a confidence thing, though, 'cause like you don't really know who you are until you are completely out of your own cesspool. Like if you're surrounded by a bunch of people and they influence you, the way they are . . . then you don't know who you are, but when you get out of your own cesspool and into a group of . . . "foreigners." I went to this suburban school. And it wasn't just the White people, it was the way Black people were raised, Asian people were raised. Everybody was raised completely different than I was. So I was completely out of my comfort zone. So I realized, for the first year that I went there, I was uncomfortable with myself because I didn't know how to express myself. I don't want to act "Ghetto," I don't want to act "Ignorant," but I don't want to be "acting White," as they would say. I'm like, um, just because I speak proper, pronounce my E's and my R's [laughter from the group]. I had to get that confidence in myself to express myself the way I feel, the way I frickin *please* . . . but until you're confident with yourself, then you're going to need something to blame, 'cause a lot of us use "because I'm Black." But that's just really bad. It's like now you've brought *all* of us down because you think *you* can't get a job 'cause you're Black. Does that mean I can't get a job 'cause I'm Black? You just have to have that confidence in yourself to say, "This is who I am, this is how I want to express myself."

Wow, I think to myself. She just touched on a lot. I recognize that Autumn is exhibiting what Tommy stated previously, a sense of being "free to be who you are. . . . To build things and create things for yourself…*understand* who you are racially, to understand your history, and . . . It's not about division, it's about understanding" (May 24th). Autumn also touches on socialized norms of what it means to be "Black," as in ghetto, or "White," as in proper. I consider how scholars dis/agree in the idea that even though most Blacks historicity of in-justice continue to affect their lives, that not all have universal shared beliefs and experiences, denouncing a linked fate (Banks, 2004; Sleeter,

2004). Being Black does not mean one is "Ghetto," as Autumn states, and White is not necessarily "Proper." Khristine continues:

> It shouldn't matter about the race in general. 'Cause you like have African Americans who are preppy, and you got some Caucasians who act Ghetto . . . Everybody acts different ways, but some in different races act like another race. I don't think it's like Blacks are known for "acting Ghetto." I don't think it's just a Black thing.
>
> Khristine adds: It's what you're raised around.
>
> Jay D: If you're raised in the hood, then you gonna be hood.
>
> "Yeah!" Everybody agrees excitedly and chatters in unison.
>
> Khristine: Like you said, there's a lot of Caucasians that act Ghetto.
>
> Jay D adds: "Yeah."
>
> Khristine: So, I'm going to speak on that. OK, my girlfriend for instance [who is Black] . . . Everybody thinks that she's like a Ghetto person. But if everybody really knew her, she about the Whitest they come.
>
> Dean agrees aggressively, nodding: "Yeah, she 'bout the *Whitest* they come."
>
> Khristine:
>
> They be sayin, "Why you act like that, why you trying to act White?" It's not that she trying to act White . . . that's how she is. Like if you were to meet her family, they're all proper, they all talk like that, so it's like, that's what she was around. Then I know this other *White* girl who talks "Bitch and Nigga" and I'll be like [she scowls and pauses for effect]. You *know*, that's my friend though, so I don't really trip about it, but also, I can't say anything, 'cause that's what *she* was raised around.

The students seem to agree that, although race is usually associated with a certain location or behavior, it does not draw a distinct line between who is allotted access to certain behaviors. I think back to my interview with DY a couple of days earlier, when he also touched on this subject. He believes that racial expression isn't only about experience and surroundings:

> ‘Cause then if that were the case, my brother would be Black. People would be saying he’s Black, because he’s mostly around Black people, but no, he’s still the White boy, but there’s nothing wrong with that. All race is, is the color of your skin . . . it’s not even what language you speak. All race is, is the color of your skin. (June 2nd)

Various beliefs emerge. DY believes that racial expression is mostly about the color of one’s skin, and that lived experience does not affect racial identity. DY focuses on the color of one’s skin in classification of race and expression. Some say that race doesn’t determine how one acts—it depends upon who they are surrounded by. Therefore, racial expression is difficult to categorize and is viewed differently according to person. As I return to the focus group conversation, it begins to diverge between the use of language and how it reflects one’s race and, sometimes promotes stereotypes.

> Cashious: I was just talking to somebody who attended an Ebonics class at some college, and the very first day he walked in the class and they were breaking it down what it means, “I b’s in the Trap.” He was offended by it, man, and he’s gonna call up the mayor and tell some people. I was happy ‘cause he’s got that power to do it.
>
> Autumn: But that was our Black ignorant-ass Black people that made up that stuff, so we can’t be mad at what our own people do. That’s like getting mad at the stereotype that all Black people sag, when the majority of Black youth sag. Like, what’s up with the word niggas? . . . We succumb to our own stereotypes.

Students note that stereotypes exist, and are created both systemically and through the actions of individuals.

To address this in the school, TJ attempts to bring “forward . . . teaching kids how to function in a dual society, because there’s a saying in Hip Hop: ‘top to the bottom, from the bottom to the top.’ See what I’m saying?” (June 5th).

Top to the Bottom, Bottom to the Top

On a different date, earlier even than the focus group, TJ's interview touches on the same idea that the focus group was leading to. Continuing his previous thought, TJ adds:

> So, "Top to the Bottom, from the Bottom to the Top" means that I can function on *any* level. I can get down on the corner and be in some street shit, or I can be in a corporate Fortune 500 setting and *still* be on point. I got it like that! And so, they have to learn *how* to, and *when* to appropriately use their different abilities, you know? If you're going to go get a job and you're trying to work for a straight-laced company, you can't have your pants sagging and your hoody on. If you're working with a fresh-line entrepreneurial Hip Hop culture new-wave company, that might be OK. But you gotta be able to analyze that. (TJ)

Without any guidance, the focus group begins to talk about adapting to two different ways of being. Jay D continues:

> I went to two White schools when I moved out here to the eastside, and I was like, "*What*"?
>
> Cashious: Yeah, when I first met Autumn, man, Autumn was like a complete White girl.
>
> Autumn: "I *was.*"
>
> Cashious: She was like "Cashious, Black people are just ignorant. I don't *like* Black people."
>
> Autumn: Uhhhh! I was like, 'What, you smoke weed? Isn't that illegal? Your *mom* got you smoking weed?
>
> Cashious: We was arguing *every day* in school.
>
> Autumn: "*Every day."*
>
> Cashious: "*Arguing*. 'You gonna *judge* me cause I'm from the *hood*?" (he mimics her)
>
> Autumn: I'm in the hood and I'm fine. I listened to this guy [Cashious] and I realized that he comes from a complete different background from me. But this mug is *smart!* Like it don't matter where you come from. It's what you *learn* from. Now if you come from the hood, you got that hood mentality and you ain't

never learned nothing from the outside! But this *N* opened up his mind, too, and was like, "You gotta learn the other side." Like Cashious didn't know what a bank account was. He ain't never had a bank account. Ever. So me and my sisters helped him set up a bank account.

Cashious: 'Cause they taught me. They just taught me how to switch it up and go into a job, all suited so I can get the job on the spot. They taught me the whole proper side to it, 'cause they were raised in and around Whites, and they *know* how to do that stuff.

Autumn: And this man [Cashious] showed me how to be who I am! And just because I act a certain way does not make me any less of who I am. So I started realizing . . . about White girls, realizing that's not who I am. . . . I'm a Black American . . . just because I talk proper does not make me White in any way.

Cashious: And then I always hate how people associate proper with White and ignorant with Black. Come on now, you! [He points to Jay D]. You've probably been called White before, haven't you?

Jay D: Yes I have, a lot of times, because of the way I talk. You don't even hear in my voice that I'm from Chicago.

Cashious: Ain't nothing wrong with that.

Jay D: They say, "You a little White boy," and I say, "I is what I is."

They laugh.

Cashious: "They be saying, 'Why you saying the whole word? White people be like 'D.O.N.T.'"

He says this in slow motion, pronouncing every letter precisely, and everybody laughs.

Autumn: My uncle, he says like half a word and I'm like why you acting so Black? He's not acting Black, it's where he from. That doesn't mean he's ignorant.

Cashious: I hate when I speak proper and people just be looking at me and saying, "Nigga, you fake as hell, I just heard you over here talking like this and that." I know how to switch it up. Why can't I switch it up?

Autumn: That's your choice, but you ain't going to go into a job interview and say, "Yo, man, Dog, I swear to *God* that I was outside on the bus man, they be trippin." No, you're going to go in there and say, "Yes, I'm sorry I am late. The public transportation was a little off today." And then go to your friends and say,

> "Yo, man I had that job interview today, I kilt it though, man." Not, "Yes, I had a very successful job interview."

She continues:

> You gotta open up your mind, though. . . . People are different everywhere you go. You gotta learn to adapt.

This is exactly one of TJ's goal for the students to learn: "Top to the Bottom, Bottom to the Top. You can function on any level," he says (June 5th).

Chapter VII

FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

Research Overview

> To engage in a serious discussion of race in America, we must begin not with the problems of black people but with the flaws of American society—flaws rooted in historical inequalities and longstanding cultural stereotypes. . . . The implication is that only certain Americans can define what it means to be American—while the rest must simply "fit in." (Cornel West, 1993a, p. 3)

The purpose of this study was to explore how racial identity is expressed in an exemplary high school setting that attracts and retains African American students through the arts. I investigated how this school supports creative exploration and racial expression via its structure, philosophies, teaching, and curricula. Finally, I examined what students found valuable in their educational process, and discovered that these findings challenge standardized measures of success.

An analysis of literature supports the study's theoretical frameworks. I referred to Critical Race Theory (CRT) for a historical analysis of racially biased policies that affect education. I also explored the original intention of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP) to address the educational engagement of African American students, and I reviewed literature on race and creative identities.

Presented in the portraiture of style writing, the findings provided a description of the school's philosophies, leaders, and students. I also described the school's structure,

pedagogy, and curricula, which contribute to student learning and engagement. Discussions on race, racism, and racial expression in students' art forms completed the findings chapters.

Prelude

My findings are both predictable and unexpected. Each conclusion lends significance to the importance of examining exemplary models of instruction that African American students report to increase their educational engagement and learning. As Gardner (1997) reminds us:

> First of all people have to see examples of places which are like their own places where the new kind of education really works, where students are learning deeply, where they can exhibit their knowledge publicly. . . . So we need to have enough good examples. Second of all, we need to have the individuals who are involved in education . . . be able to switch, so to speak, from a teacher-centered . . . kind of education, to one where the preparation is behind the scenes and the child himself or herself is at the center of learning. (April 12th, Retrieved from http://www.edutopia.org/multiple-intelligences-howard-gardner-video)

My findings reflect Gardner's comment. In the school I studied, education works, especially for its particular student body. Students have shown that they are learning, producing, sharing their knowledge, re-engaging with their education—and ultimately re-engaging with themselves. This has required leadership to create a space that encourages students to flourish.

Four main conclusions illustrate that the High School for Recording Arts (HSRA) is a s*pace for creative engagement*. First, students are offered the freedom to *become* and to re-invent themselves with each new production, creative endeavor, community event, performance, and new recording. I recognize that students are becoming more self-aware of strengths that lead to opportunities and possibilities for their future. Second, students

are offered a space to be *free* to express, experiment, explore, reflect on their strengths, and (re)invent. Living the exploration of freedom plays a vital role in achieving that freedom (Greene, 1977). This cannot be achieved without the third aspect: a *space* to explore freedom. The environment at HSRA is introspective and reflective, and it is a space where students explore and become something they once were not. This coexists with an outward physical space where students are offered the tools and technology that promote exploration—both of which contribute to their becoming. Fourth, the school's leaders have created an atmosphere that encourages *creative expression* that reflects their students' lives, interests, race (or not), and hopes for the future—assisting in their becoming. This requires a creative approach in implementing philosophies, pedagogy, and curricula that challenge standardized models of success. These four main tenets guide what TJ hopes for: encouraging students to become "life-long learners."

Becoming

Students become and explore themselves through projects and production. Any form of production, be it media, musical, visual, or literary, is an exploration of identity. This exploration, which eventually reveals itself through expression, offers students the opportunity to become something that they once were not. This does not mean that they arrive at school as blank slates in need of changing to be "better." Becoming better or worse is not associated with becoming something they once were not. Students evaluate themselves in relation to the amount of effort they extend to reach their fullest potential at that particular time. They consistently reflect on their contribution and their satisfaction with their product—a self-reflective process that connects to a heightened awareness of

their capabilities, interests, and possibilities. Critique of that potential co-exists with enthusiasm and learning, and students' self-judgment eventually morphs into pride and a time when they claim a title: "I am a singer," "I am a poet," "I am a rapper," "I am a writer," "I am a photographer."

This *becoming* requires a learning environment that is like a blank canvas. It gives students the freedom to explore, which contributes to their becoming of something new—to create and recreate who they are and explore freely what they have to offer each other and the world. Their lives are certainly not blank canvases on which they paint themselves. Rather, their production is identity: Once they fill one canvas, students go on to another and constantly shape and reshape a new identity. Each production is a new creation that emerges from the new selves they are in the process of creating. Each canvas, each new project represents a part of who they are—the part they are then ready to execute and at least partially complete. Eventually, their productions form a collage, but it remains unfinished because the next project will be anything the student wants it to be. The beauty is that the portraits they make of themselves—the new selves they are creating—are never finished, though they have completed projects from beginning through production. Each project becomes them, and they change through the process of producing each new part of themselves. Production itself has influenced their process of *becoming* and has led them to claim their identity—and not just one identity, but many.

Teaching, too, contributes to the students' new becoming. As Lave's (1996) research in Liberia on master and apprenticeship relationships and learning shows: "[In] Liberia it appeared that masters were most importantly embodied exemplars of what apprentices were becoming. . . . Also, an apprentice law practitioner is not alone with a

master, rather both are participants in larger, varied, constellations of participants" (p. 153). At HSRA, students also become teachers, mentors, and contributors to the HSRA community, if not the larger community. Teachers also become students—learning to "get out of the way" of their students and acquiring new insights through students' creative process of becoming. Students become teachers and teachers become students as they participate within the larger community**.**

Freedom

At the outset of this research, I did not predict a conclusion predicated on freedom, since only a few students used the word "freedom" in their interviews (Autumn, DY). However, as I continued to analyze what it meant to have a self-directed, open-canvas learning environment—one that is student-driven and hands-on, with relative freedom of expression, I realized how central this freedom is to education at HSRA. The fact that students take "control" of their own learning (Autumn, Lauren, Cassey) is key to the school's success. Students repeatedly stated, for example, that they can do a project on anything they wanted: freedom. They are allowed to come and go pretty much as they please: freedom. The schools hours of operations provide greater access to space: freedom. Learning is hands-on and experiential, but could be slanted towards traditional literacy-based learning if the student desired, and I witnessed it: freedom. Completing personal learning plan projects requires traditional forms of research, but offers students freedom of choice in relation to how they choose to disseminate their findings and what they choose to research. More freedom. And these students expressed appreciation for the freedom they are given.

I realized this rather late in my research, however, so I did not discuss it, outright, in my literature review. I do discuss literature that relates to an idea of freedom in the section on Critical Race Theory, which addresses historic injustices. I review literature that implies the importance of freedom in CRP, which focuses on African American students as social contributors to society. I also included Greene and hooks, who discuss educating *for* freedom and educating as *acts* of freedom. These conversations center on the belief that educating students *for* freedom awakens them to possibilities. Because of this, self-reflection is imperative for acquiring an awareness of one's lived realities and potential for change. In addition, students who *act* on their freedom, capabilities, and strengths move toward "awakening imaginative capacities and appealing to people's freedom. Free human beings can choose, can move beyond where they are, can ascend to places of which, in their ordinariness, they could have had no idea." (Greene 1994, p. 501).

Students at HSRA are given the opportunity to ascend to places that had been unavailable to them. In their "ordinariness" of familiarity, in their previous educational experiences, they might have been aware of their strengths and interests, but they had had no idea how to move forward with them, and no place of possibility. To "educate for freedom, then, we have to challenge and change the way everyone thinks about pedagogical process . . . we have to teach about process" (hooks, 1994, p. 144). HSRA administrators have challenged the traditional educational system by changing the process of students' experience. Their students experience freedom to explore because the pedagogy emphasizes process rather than standardized outcomes.

Eleanor Roosevelt's quote, "with freedom, comes responsibility," applies to HSRA. Students' freedom is not meant to be abused. In fact, the responsibility placed on the student was even greater because of the self-initiation required to finish tasks. Moreover, the creativity involved in each project required students to immerse and invest themselves deeply into the outcome. Because of this, staff also needed to trust the students to act responsibly. There were, of course, suspensions, discipline problems, and students who were off-task. Likewise, teachers had to stay informed on student progress. hooks (1994) reinforces the idea of "education as the practice of freedom makers. The bottom-line assumption has to be that everyone in the classroom is able to act responsibly" (p. 152). Responsibility and freedom are therefore connected.

Conscious Awakening

Greene (1977) explores the idea of being awakened to an access of freedom and to personal existence in a "problematic world" (p. 2). HSRA's students exhibited their awakening by re-engaging with school, productive contributions, and development of a revitalized self. Greene refers to Thoreau, who believed that, "We must live deliberately . . . discover our conscious . . . and live with endeavor.. . . . and rouse others to uncover their discoveries. . . . Live deliberately" (p. 2).

I witnessed how HSRA as an institution fostered student's purposeful exploration and consciousness of self, a criticality of their strengths, their fluid identity, their desires, and hopes. Students were living deliberately and engaging with self through their productions and creations. The arts provided a platform, the school provided a space, and freedom allowed students to become more conscious of self and their strengths. Rather than simply moving through a school where "the teachers didn't give a damn," HSRA's

students deliberately chose a different path—one where their productivity was acknowledged and encouraged. I reinforce this with the following passage from Greene (1977):

> If the human being is understood to be someone always in search of himself or herself, choosing himself or herself in the situations of a problematic life. There are works of art; there are certain works in history, philosophy, and psychology. They are works deliberately created to move people to critical awareness, to a sense of moral agency, and to conscious engagement with the world. As I see it, they ought—under the rubric of the "arts and humanities"—to be central to any curriculum that is constructed today. (p. 2)

The constructed pedagogy and curriculum at HSRA was "deliberately created to move people to critical awareness" of themselves and the society of which they participate. This criticality was not for the purpose to criticize society, but more so to promote a critical consciousness of self. I think back to what Tommy told me at the onset of my research, "You have to first help them value themselves." HSRA understands that education is a tool to promote a valuing of self, in turn, assisting them in become conscious of their strengths and their productive possibilities. An example of this is when students told me, "You have a lot of freedom here" (Autumn, DY). For them, freedom means freedom to explore, and to create projects of interest, but a by-product is that they eventually realize their strengths as contributors to themselves and their community. Ultimate freedom is realizing and using one's own personal strengths. Dewey (1986) believes that this realization of possibilities relates to and relies upon one's own lived realities, rather than things handed down.

Students need a space to create, realize, and self-actualize. Since TJ understands this, he deliberately opened a school to meet a previously unmet need: a space for African American youth to create and realize possibilities.

Space

The *space* students are offered for self-exploration is what is novel at HSRA. Throughout the study, I began to recognize how space relates to freedom. Without space to be free, freedom is meaningless. The concept of space is multi-dimensional however because space can be conceptualized in terms of a location, as in a room, a home, a car, or an area. But space can also be an inward, emotional, spiritual, productive, and individual creative space that students explore as they develop. Then, inward space and outward space intersect. The physical space and all of its available tools, help foster students' inner being to develop. They ultimately co-exist in freedom to explore and become.

In regards to HSRA's outer physical space, the fact that the advisory space was open rather than isolated, enclosed by walls and doors really mattered. It mattered that the area was simply divided by low, four-foot walls, so that people could see throughout the entire area, watch what others were doing, and be part of a community rather than separated from it. As Boys (2011) says:

> Experiencing…spaces, then, is informed not just by its immediate material qualities, but also by awareness of wider social and institutional agendas and contexts; and engaging with the various boundary conditions/crossing of learning spaces is not merely a physical act, but a complex negotiation of meanings. (p. 91)

The open learning environment co-exists with the school's social agenda of creating community—which, in turn, co-exists with developing character and consciousness of self within these contexts.

Lauren says, "It's just real open here." This can be even more meaningful for students who have previously been denied a physical space of opportunity to develop the

inner space of self-development. Although Lauren is not necessarily limiting her comment to the relation of physical space, what she is referring to is how the school's learning environment is student-driven, and through this, students learn inner work of self-initiation and an increased awareness of possibilities. What is different at HSRA is that the educational setting fosters exploration of themselves and their contributions. Dewey (1959) says: "Experience and education cannot be directly equated to each other. For some experiences are mis-educative. Any experience is mis-educative that has the effect of arresting or distorting the growth of further experience" (247). HSRA does not mis-educate because it does not arrest or distort growth of experience– quite the contrary. Maxine Greene (1988) states, "We might think of freedom as an opening of spaces as well as perspectives, with everything depending on the actions we undertake in the course of our quest" (p. 5). The students' quest involves a "rejection of the insufficient or the unendurable, a clarification, an imaging of a better state of things… conscious of lacks, they may move…toward possibilities" (p. 5). I reinforce this idea that a conscious of self emerges in the space of possibilities.

Contribution of Creative Voice

I have reiterated the historical nature of policies and laws that have silenced African American citizens and misrepresented and eliminated opportunity for them. For this reason, developing, working on, creating, and becoming something different—something represented and seen, heard, and listened to is particularly significant. Not only did students express but they were heard, recorded, and noted in the history books of HSRA and the world.

Creativity that leads to production can contribute to a new becoming. It can be expressive of self, expressive of confusion or clarity, and contradictory. For this student body, I found that creativity was all of the above. As TJ reminds us:

> [HSRA is] immersed in young people and their creativity, their interests who want to share their creativity, to record it, to market it, to understand, to be a better creative person as well as a better business person . . . so that they easily find their place in it.

Rather than silencing possibility, students learn at HSRA that other people will listen and care. As hooks (1994) says of education that silences student contribution or voice:

> This undermines a pedagogy that seeks constantly to affirm the value of student voices. It suggests a democratic process by which we erase words, and their capacity to influence and affirm. With that erasure Suzie is not able to see herself as a speaking subject worthy of voice. I don't mean only in terms of how she names her personal experience, but how she interrogates both the experience of others, and how she responds to knowledge present. (p. 149)

HSRA incorporates these radical creative spaces for sharing of self, which Tommy describes as "freedom to discover . . . and allow(ing) them to explore," which have been shown to correlate with a transformation of self.

The students also learn how to listen, how to hear one another, and how to be receptive to each other's strengths and weaknesses. Not once did I witness any student mock or discourage another one in relation to their ability. No one was ever made to feel less than, or feel inferior to, "where they were at, at that time" (Tommy). They might have entered the school feeling skeptical and fearful to express themselves, but the positive response from their community allowed them to become more confident each time they performed. Lauren discusses how the audience helped her become more confident and see possibilities for herself. Deezy discuss his development as an artist, but it is always in relation to how he understands himself, not out of fear of audience

perceptions. This contributed enormously to the students feeling safe to express themselves in the community. As Cashious told me:

> [The] staff just always encourages everybody to get up on stage and show their talent, whatever they have. So this girl, three years later, she goes up on stage. . . . She waited for three whole years till she felt comfortable, but now she's a beast!"

Staff encourages opportunity, the school structure offers space for African American creative voices to develop and be heard, and students and staff listen. These are highly significant for students who have traditionally been silenced—especially in their past educational experiences. Delpit (1994) reiterates that: "the more students recognize their own uniqueness and particularity, the more they listen" (pp. 150-151). They become both a contributor and a receiver.

Freedom of Expression

When students are listened to, they begin to awaken to possibilities (Greene, 1977; hooks, 1994). Expression and receiving, voice and message, are inter-related. As I stated in Chapter VI:

> The freedom to articulate their truths "keeps it real," because many students use their art to tell unpredictable and revealing stories. Stories of the past, present, and their hopes are juxtaposed somewhere in the creative process between their rehearsed, semi-rehearsed, and improvisatory work.

The importance of expressing one's lived realities and "telling it like it is" (TJ), is appreciated by students and reinforces a place of being. Their being, their voice, their awakening to possibilities are real. As Tommy said:

> [Projects] look real, they look professional, and they look innovative. . . . I think their true personalities are reflecting in their projects. If it's something really original about them. . . . There is a certain kind of raw authenticity and realness to it. . . . They're real.

Tommy establishes that students express selves that are "reflective of who they are," their lives, and their space; faking one's self is not an option. Their freedom to do this was, for example, expressed through "feelings," as Miles said about his lyrics: "I'm telling you how I feel, and what's going on in my life at the time." Cashious, on the other hand, doesn't necessarily express feelings, but brings up race to *keep it real*: "Race affects my music a lot for me. 'Cause coming from the hood and just being African American or Black, whatever we call it, there's a lot of different views that you pick up coming from the street life." Or, as Lauren candidly refers to her freedom of expression, it is a source of healing, but also a source of strength to help others through abuse. She tells me that people can make: "Something negative into something positive. . . . It gives me closure. It's my own type of closure, like therapeutic."

Students feel comfortable enough in the school's space to candidly express such heartfelt experiences, which reinforces hooks' (1994) ideas: "Students of color may not feel at all 'safe' in what appears to be a neutral setting. It is the absence of feeling of safety that often promotes prolonged silence or lack of student engagement" (p. 39). The environment at HSRA is created by staff efforts to establish a loving and secure environment. It ultimately assists in an increased level of student engagement. This requires teachers to work with the student body in creating a safe space to express and to also be received. This intimate setting allows for an inner freedom to develop. Students' truths, lyrics, and realities are vested with this freedom.

Teachers, likewise, freely express themselves when designing courses and encourage participatory and hands-on learning. They have the freedom to design courses and develop ones that (a) represented their teaching and personal interests, (b) reflected

student interests, and (c) emphasized hands-on learning. One example is the female teacher who was the partial coordinator for the *Get Your Green* project. She was an avid biker who rode to school almost every day, enjoyed gardening, and had a holistic approach to life. She brought her personal interests to the students and was partly responsible for teaching them how to build their own bikes; she also assisted in organizing the bike ride from Quebec to Montreal. Initially, students might not have been interested in global warming or making bikes, but the hands-on environment stimulated their interest and investment in the project. It became relevant because they built something of their own accord. The idea was teacher-driven and mandated by no curriculum. And students learned while teachers had the freedom to create.

Freedom to Be Critical

At HSRA, some teachers purposefully created pedagogy and curriculum to induce critically conscious freedom of expression on the part of the students. Greene (1969) states that: "Liberating pedagogies, wherever they take shape, most often are intended to enable learners to become different as they make increasingly adequate sense of their lived worlds" (p. 300). Like Donnie, for instance, he created the Urban Music course that attempted to "teach" the students how to think critically. Freedom of expression and critically conscious lyricism were produced in songs about racial profiling, the prison industrial system, and homelessness. Donnie understands that it cannot be assumed that African American students instinctively acknowledge how race has affected their life situations. This is an assumption that can cause a disconnect between teachers and students of "other people's children" (Delpit, 2006), and requires teachers to understand

that we have to "teach" students to think and talk about race as intellectuals. Dorth (2005) writes that Hip Hop pedagogy can be designed for this purpose:

> The curricular approach is varied, some are focused on developing skills such as literacy, while others are knowledge based in seeking to teach critical thinking and analytical skills . . . combining Freire's philosophy with the medium of Hip Hop to get young students engaged and critically thinking about situations they are in. (p. 4)

As I have shown, Donny considers critical inquiry an important aspect of education, particularly when it comes to race. He believes that students need to know history in order to help guide their future. Moreover, hooks (1994) states that: "Education as the practice of freedom is not just about liberatory knowledge, it's about a liberatory practice in the classroom" (p. 147). Their criticality put into practice was writing, and producing songs of meaning. I think, too, about how Niles' *Hip Hop History and the Arts* course included students' right to place themselves into the making of musical history. The song, "*The Next Move*," addresses their goals for life, while simultaneously realizing their potential. Although it seems rare, a space for expressing such critical awareness does exist.

Pedagogy and Teaching

Relationships as Pedagogy

Student/teacher relationships are a central point in analyzing what *works* to create students' enhanced engagement with school. Each of HSRA's four philosophies of Community, Family, Respect, and Education had love at its root. This was the unexpected finding that guided all aspects of teaching and learning. At the community meeting, Ms. Chi Director of the Health and Sexuality program said that: "It's always

with *love* underneath. . . . Your well-being is very important to me" (May 28th). Being committed to students' well-being grounds the school's four philosophies. Students recognize and appreciate it. Cassey, the student who lived in her own apartment, shared with me her deep appreciation for the school and the role it plays in her life. For her, the school met a need greater than any instructional ends: it provided a place of love and a security of a home by "changing" her life. It is a scenario that I saw over and over again.

Love for self, as Gay and Barber (1987) say, is critical: "Self-hood is ruled by doubts of self-worth and dependence of Anglo definitions of Blackness" (p. 38). Although a definition of self can be momentary and reflexive, history has no doubt created this scenario for many African American youth. Tommy's quote, "When you have to first help a young person value education . . . in the end, what you realize . . . it's not even about valuing education first—it's really first valuing themselves," is so pertinent is my research. Tommy addresses the beliefs that the majority of the students enter into the school, often dismayed from previous educational experiences and sometimes distrustful of the possibilities. As students progress through the program with love from the teachers, and an opportunity to express, many of them begin to value themselves in new ways, and recognize their self-worth. An identity shift occurs.

As the root, love also allowed students and teachers to be partial partners. I say partial, because teachers—the adults—were still authority figures, but mutual trust, and respect created a classroom of cohorts in learning. Jones (2001) talks about this: "teacher and student as cohorts in the humanization project which transcends lines of educational authority . . . as a partner of the students . . . is impossible without the critical consciousness . . . essential in liberatory education" (p. 8). During the many community

meetings and performances, teaching and learning I observed, I watched how the teachers and students worked together collaboratively. I witnessed it everywhere, in organizing events, in the recording studio, editing videos, in the DJ booth, and in filming the *Last Move* video. The collaboration helped nurture the school's philosophy of community to thrive. The teaching, pedagogy, curricula, and school philosophies all interrelate with a collaborative environment.

Teaching

"Get[ting] out of the way," as TJ states, sheds light on how relationships and pedagogy intersect. It is a way of teaching differently to create a pedagogy built on trust, respect, and the belief that students will achieve and even exceed their goals. The teacher provides the crux of the lesson but then "gets out of the way" for the student to create and finish. This encourages students to access their own thoughts, creations, and words, which reinforces their selfhood and their voice. Allsup (1997) stated:

> The experience I've gained has taught me that to keep a student involved in music every teaching consideration must be student-focused. Teaching strategies must be designed not only around the learner's interest, but must also take into account the student's culture and values, along with the student's relationship to learning and self-discipline. (p. 34)

Being student-focused requires teaching strategies and pedagogy to promote individuality and self-initiation in order to meet benchmarks and finish projects. Autumn, for example, told me, "[We can] pick what we talk about . . . we can make a project about anything. . . . What really motivates the student to do well is the fact that they can do it through what they love best!" In short, at HSRA, teachers are not commanders who dictate exactly what and how students learn. Students have choice to create as they so

desire. This offers traditional educational settings insight to the possibilities for developing alternative models that increase student engagement.

Teaching at HSRA also imitates the framework of a liberatory education that Jones (2001) suggests: “teacher-student dichotomization be eradicated so that both are simultaneously teaching and taught” (p. 8). I do not make the claim that HSRA was specifically created as a liberatory education, though elements of liberation are embedded in its teaching and pedagogy. However, it is apparent at HSRA that teacher-student relationships are indeed reciprocal in relation to teaching and learning. Teachers became learners, and learners became teachers. This is also apparent in student-to-student relationships. DY told me that learning and production can be spontaneously created, and he spoke about how people “ . . . socialize, they kick it off. ‘Oh, you like doing that? Me too’; or, ‘Oh, you rap? Me too, let’s do a song together” (June 2nd). I walked into the studio many times to see students create a song without adult supervision, serving simultaneously as mentors and teachers for each other. I think of hooks (1994), which believes that many educators think that they “must return to the traditional way of doing it (teaching), otherwise I don’t get the respect, and the students don’t learn” (pp. 144-145). HSRA proves this statement wrong. Traditional ways of teaching do not foster learning for these students.

Students’ work with faculty, in groups, without supervision, or solo, is always student-driven, with a touch of guidance from faculty or classmates. I found this to be an important feature in creating an engaging learning environment in which students are free of fear, free to create, free to become. To summarize, hooks (1994) discusses how freedom and engaged learning co-exist, believing that “some version of engaged

pedagogy is really the only type of teaching that truly generates excitement in the classroom . . . ” (p. 204). I found this to be true at HSRA. Excitement, pedagogy, relationships, teaching, learning, and engagement coexist.

Pedagogy with Community

Community is often thought of in terms of a classroom or school community, a community of friendships, and a community of residents in a neighborhood. Patricia Hill Collins (2013) challenges these constructs of community by understanding that community can also be “sites of political engagement and contestation” (p. 12), and argues that community is (a) a dynamic dimension of lived experience, (b) language that is partly a taken-for-granted lexicon of contemporary social relations, (c) a way to construct everyday knowledge to think and do politics . . . where inequalities are renegotiated, and (d) the organizing principle of political behavior or as a system of meaning for political understandings. Finally, community is used to respond to specific political challenges associated with intersecting power relations, especially where issues of social justice are part of the political terrain. (p. 13).

At HSRA community is larger in concept than simply a classroom, a school, and a neighborhood. Its genesis was a specific response to political inequity. Because of this, as the students use resources, teachers, and opportunities at HSRA they usually become engaged citizens of the community. This is displayed, for example through the Trayvon Martin video, which the students considered “meaningful” (Autumn, DY). Autumn remembers crying in the sound booth, struck by the emotion her lyrics evoked as she realized that a young student her age could be “violently murdered, for no reason at all.” Students also display their engagement by collaborating with entrepreneurial

organizations, creating videos and songs, and bringing their voices to life. For example, State Farm sponsored the 26 Seconds "Stay in School" campaign, which served to develop an awareness of self in relation to community. The students served a need of the community by advocating the importance of an education. Also, TJ examples how the students provided the community AIDS and HIV awareness training through their music:

> When I first started the school, we were working on a project called *HIV Ain't No Joke*, and the students created a peer-learning program with HAAS [health and wellness program]. They talked to kids about AIDS and STDs and all the problems of promiscuous sex.

This illustrates how teaching and pedagogy that encourage community collaboration also create an engaging learning environment.

Culturally Relevant Curriculum

The genesis of HSRA aligns with Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP) by focusing on the strengths and possibilities of African American students. TJ knew that African American students can be "holders and creators of knowledge" (Delgado & Bernal, 2002), so he focused on possibility rather than deficit (Ware, 2006). HSRA was created with, and for, African American males with the understanding that they were creators of knowledge but were disengaged in school—i.e., skipping school, dropping out, or getting expelled. Yet they desired an engaging, interactive education that addressed their interests and most notably, provided relevance in their lives. Although they never used the term "culturally relevant," they did use "relevant."

Learning is "open" for students to explore on their own accord, whether it is culturally congruent, racially expressive, or not. This openness increased academic engagement that contributed to their graduation, and student's specifically sought out

opportunity to express themselves according to their own interests. It normally led to a self-interest that imitated their lives, their race, and their lived experiences.

In regard to curriculum, Gay (2010) states that, “the highest quality educational programs and practices can never be accomplished if some ethnic groups and their contributions to the development of U.S. history, life, and culture are ignored or demeaned” (p. 21). Textbooks and curricula often silence, omit, or inaccurately portray African Americans’ historical experiences, thereby contributing to the problem. HSRA does not have this problem at all. Its walls are full of past and present African American icons, and students are in regards to learning, they were free to choose any topic for their Personal Learning Plans. This allows students to explore the histories of African American scholars, producers, and contributors on their own accord, and to express musically whatever they choose (with the exception of profanity). Most often, students wrote music derived from African American genres, but this was not relegated to Hip-Hop. Miles, for example, also explored reggae, reggaeton, trap music and R & B; while DY explicitly told me that he loves all forms of music. Cassey said she mostly loves R & B. This corroborates Sampson and Garrison-Wade’s (2010) findings that “students have a keen interest in culturally relevant curriculum” (p. 291).

What expands the idea of culturally relevant pedagogy is freedom of choice. The current discourse on culturally relevant music curriculum for African American students usually centers on Hip Hop. It is the primary genre used in an attempt to attract students to a culturally relevant pedagogy (Dyson, 2007; Hill, 2005; Stovall, 2006b). Although Hip Hop was a major source of expression for these students, they did not want to be limited to it. Many students, as well as staff, made it very clear that they love “all kinds

of music," and appreciated the opportunity to explore. As Dimitriadis (2001) states, there is:

> . . . a necessity of a more genuinely negotiated curriculum, one that would allow teachers to approach the lives of young people in more open and less prefigured ways. . . . educators need to be more creative in their understanding of the kind of links young people make with popular culture. (p. 126)

This reinforces my findings that an open approach to education, which "approaches the lives," rather than depositing knowledge without differentiating lifestyle, can be an engaging approach to education.

I have come to the conclusion that culturally relevant teaching is generally a teacher-driven approach. There are certainly exceptions, and culturally responsive teaching attempts to address this by building on responsive rather than mandated pedagogy. However, in music education, most classrooms are teacher-centered and operate under the assumption that teachers know what students will consider relevant or not. It is therefore crucial to consider being "able to switch . . . from a teacher-centered, 'Let's stuff it into the kid's mind' kind of education, to one where the preparation is behind the scenes and the child himself or herself is at the center of learning" (Gardner, 1997). Freedom of choice in relevancy to student lives is appreciated.

HSRA does use aspects of CRP, but because of its open-canvas, freedom-of-choice, and student-driven projects, CRP became a byproduct, because students often gravitated freely toward relevant African American material and creative expression.

Multiple Literacies

Most of the students at HSRA display advanced multi-modal, multi-literate capabilities, partially developed from HSRA's teaching, pedagogy, and curriculum.

These students are 21st century digitized. While it can be argued that most high school students in technologically advanced societies are so, HSRA's students have the opportunity to maximize the use of technology because the school *is* music, production, and the arts. As Morrell (2012) states:

> Being literate in this new world means . . . knowing about mp3s and jpegs and wav files. It means being able to program HTML on your personal websites (or blogs, or wikis) and sending e-mails from your mobile or tablet in a taxicab or uploading pictures from your phon to "friends" via Facebook, Twitter, or any other number of social media sites. . . . However, for all of their digital expertise, there is still a great deal that these youth have to learn about how to process the information that they are inundated with via these new portals of information. They also need to develop the skills to be able to create information that can be shared via websites, digital photographs and film, and online journal spaces like weblogs (blogs). All of these methods of accessing, processing, and disseminating information can be loosely associated under the umbrella of 21st-century literacies. (p. 301)

At HSRA, students consistently used technology and disseminated their creative productions in music, film, photography, and video. They developed the skills to share their songs on iPods, move them from computers to JPeg, mp3 players, or on phones, and share them on the Internet. Demitriadis (2001) furthers the conversation by stating: "The video medium reinforced prevailing currents in hip-hop music . . . moving it toward a kind of literality that was exceedingly appropriate for all kinds of mass-mediation" (p. 29). Video production is as common at HSRA as any other art form.

The emphasis on technology is apparent throughout HSRA's student body. Students claim themselves as poets, emcees, freestylers, producers, videographers, singers, and beat makers, but they are also multi-literate disseminators of their art. Instead of referring to artists outside of the school context who are creating open texts in their artistic compositions, expanding the "ordinary conceptions of musicianship" (Allsup, 2013, p. 58), it seems we have found a school space where, as Allsup says:

> [Students] are exhibiting a kind of multimodal fluency that goes beyond a common sense notion of interdisciplinarity, embracing the fullest range of expressive space available to them: exploring digital and physical geographies through sonic and visual arenas: producing, exchanging, and consuming shared efforts of artifacts, acoustic and digital: playing knowingly through gesture and fashion, flattening, extending, and confusing identities. They are composing more than music; they are composing selves through sound and text. (p. 58)

When music education narrows the possibilities of production to performance or (re)production, interdisciplinary expressiveness and creativity become less important. For example, the skills required to compose lyrics and melodies differ from the skills used in singing and performing. The production of visual arts in digital photography, video, and films require an entirely different way of knowing, while recording piano or drums into a recording board, requires alternate skills. Most students were able to do most of the above. While I consider the complexities involved in creating these multiple art forms, I question how this can consistently be ignored in matters of assessment.

Assessment

Standardization reinforces students to become something that already exists, perhaps reinterpreted, but still (re)done. The term “standard” is synonymous with typical, average, usual, normal. Only when students are offered a chance to fulfill their own potential and recognize their individual voices as they contribute to their growth and meet their own high expectations, is it possible to assess something new. Standardization silences students’ individuality and contributions, which can disengage students who “want to be heard . . . recognized” (Peter). HSRA, on the other hand, uses non-standardized curricula, school-produced assessment rubrics, and students’ own self-reflection; and does not standardize individual voice. Yes, individuality is difficult to

standardize because individuality is not standard, it is individual. For this reason, innovative new forms of assessment need to be developed.

Students are required to pass benchmarks of achievement as evidence of performance-based outcomes, but the true story of their success remains largely undocumented because of the "culture of power," in which students of color are "implicitly held to un-interrogated notions of achievement based on White middle class norms that pervade the educational discourse" (Delpit, 1996, cited from, Caraballo 2011, p. 161). These assessments leave many students in the "margins" (Delpit, 2006), because assessments ignore anything relevant to lived experiences. As TJ says, achievement is "relative," because many of HSRA's students enter the school "over-aged and under-credited." Looking at the growth of the student, from, as Tommy says, "where they are at, at that present time," and documenting the changes between their point of entry and their graduation, required a different kind of assessment. For example, analyzing data on how the school guided previous dropout students to graduation; or how an engaging learning environment helps students recognize possibilities for themselves, which contributes to a decline in incarceration rates after graduation could assess learning. As Truesdale's (2005) research showed, an average of 67% of students from HSRA had been involved in the criminal justice system before entering HSRA, and declined to 11% after graduation. This form of assessment is obviously non-existent in the traditional state standards data collection process. This is not to focus on deficit, but possibility.

Learning could also be assessed by analyzing the *amount* of productions a student participates in, with special consideration to the students' growth vis-à-vis their "becoming" something they once were not. The continuous production of the canvas is

the continuous development of self. This includes the unique approach to multi-modal capabilities they use to create, perform, and share their work with their greater community. These productions contribute to learning, which is connected to them becoming, which State assessments of this sort ignore.

HSRA's students display a love for their education, and I recognize this as a standard of success that goes unnoticed. They stated it again and again, in various ways: "If it weren't for this school, I wouldn't be graduating" (DY). Their consistent refrain of "I love this school" or, "This school is a life-saver" reinforces their love of learning and the desire for an engaging environment. Ultimately, all students I interviewed said that graduation was a goal. They are reiterating what Dounay (2006) found: that most dropout students wished they had not dropped out. Since the majority of the student body had previously dropped out or had gotten expelled, re-engaging students and guiding them to graduation can be as simple as creating a space where they love to learn. If a student loves learning, why is this not considered success?

Earlier, I addressed the fact that production *is* identity development for these students. For this reason, self-reflection about their production usually yielded something they were proud of as they continued to define and refine themselves as singers, songwriters, and producers. This *is* identity development, and HSRA is a place that encourages it. Production and, hands-on learning was shown to contribute to students' increased level of engagement. As Dewey (1959) states: "Education in order to accomplish its ends both for the individual learner and for society must be based upon experience—which is always the actual life-experience of the individual" (p. 251). An accomplished ends and standard of success can be defined in assessing learning growth

connected to their redefinition of self. Yet, TJ projects an even larger goal: for the students to become "life-long learners."

Race

> So, when you start talking about race to me . . . we talk about it, we have classes, we express through music you know. (Peter, June 3rd).

HSRA encourages racial exploration and expression according to the student's own will. They do not silence race talk, they do not demand race talk—they offer options and possibilities. My research confirms that African American students do talk and think *about* race. Ignoring racial topics in classrooms denies students opportunity for inquisitive engagement and exploration, as well as a way to voice their thoughts and experiences—especially their experiences *with* racism. Given the opportunity to express racialized experiences, they express it *through* their art forms. Note the emphasis of *about* race, *with* race, and *through* their art.

I have found that talking *about* race should not be ignored in an educational experience. This was apparent when students talked about race and race experiences with friends, family, and throughout the school. It was also apparent when students talked about race in relation to their prior racialized experiences with injustices they have encountered. For example, it was apparent when they described the effect upon them attending an integrated school in a "suburban" setting and their feeling of "otherness," and how Black History month was the only time they had previously explored Black History until they came to HSRA. Also, teaching *about* race is integrated into classrooms to better understand the past, present, and future. For example, Donnie's *Urban Music*

course explored historical inequities through research assignments, and students generally appreciated the opportunity to think about it critically.

Students' experiences *with* race and racism sometimes inform their artistic expressions. I noticed that students often related race *with* racism. For example, in the focus group's conversation *about* race, Dean stated: "There's still a lot of racism going on in the world." Cashious: "There ain't no blind eye to it." Later, Donnie confirmed that race is often addressed in terms of struggles that are associated *with* racism. Students' experiences of race are affected by their experiences with racism. Yet, we also witnessed a divergence in agreement. Not every African American student enters the classroom with the same background and experiences—something that Womack (2010) addresses. This is most apparent when I reflect on the diversity of students' experiences *with* race. Just because some students do not consistently focus on it, Tommy reminds me that: "it's not far under the surface." This plays out in their expression *about* race and *with* racism, *through* racial expressiveness. For instance, Tommy identifies that students explore and express race: "You know, when given an opportunity to do something lyrically, race definitely comes out." The students express racialized experiences *through* creative expression, which is sometimes a critical analysis of racism and sometimes it is just a critical awareness of their own experiences—related to race or not.

Top and the Bottom, Bottom to the Top

The theme "Top and the Bottom, Bottom to the Top" emerged from both students and teachers. It is the idea of fitting into two worlds, two levels—and everywhere in between. I interpret this to mean two worlds that are separate but attempting to co-exist, which forces inhabitants to move in, out, and through these spaces, molding and re-

creating themselves in relation to different scenarios. TJ states that the school's staff tries to help students actualize this by implementing open-canvas, hands-on learning. The multiple entrepreneurial partnerships and travel-abroad opportunities offer students the opportunity to experience new surroundings and people, merging the two worlds through lived experiences. Students present at conferences, board tour buses and perform around the country, and travel abroad promoting going green and bike safety. After all, Tommy asks, isn't this how an educational experience can look, regardless of race? But experience *is* learning for these students. They understand that they need to be skillful in moving through experiences that are sometimes racially bound.

It can be argued that most people have to merge between two worlds to climb the socio-economic ladder, or to freely display gender preference or religious affiliations. Race, however, is difficult to hide and racialized systems require conformity to standardized White norms. For example, Autumn wonders why her uncle "has to talk so Black?" as she struggles with the acceptance of her own identity. She sees her reflection in him and is filled with shame—until Cashious helps guide her to acceptance of self and the Black community. Likewise, TJ says Black speech is not readily accepted in "corporate 500." The multiple personas that African American students are required to acquire, can, as Tommy says, contribute to a devaluing of self. Until students experience a space where their voices are valued and their contributions are appreciated, their "valuing of self" (Tommy) will be difficult to achieve.

Performing Identities

It has been argued that performative identities are created and re-enacted by (a) free choice, (b) an unconscious act, or (c) reenactments of students' subconscious,

everyday exposures—which would cause one to believe that their identities are "universal truths" (Abramo, 2009; Bourdieu, 1977). When students conform to a single performing identity, this can present difficulty, but it allows for diverse reasons why one may perform their identity of choice at a particular time. It also allows for diverse performance styles to emerge as students' reflect their selves. For instance, a student who freely chooses to "act" a certain way during the creative process, taking on a different persona or character that might be remote from his or her real life, is still performing identity. I would argue that acting upon free choice *is* an identity. It can be the temporary embodiment of a character: the "act" is the becoming of something else, at least for the time being.

Likewise, the media influences subconscious acts of performing identities because of the reoccurring images and norms seen in performance styles of pop artists. Cashious, for instance, accepted the role as the appointed emcee and had free choice to act as he willed. He chose to act as an enthusiastic, powerful speaker, and his interactive commentaries were similar to the performance styles of Bernie Mac and Steve Harvey: vicarious, interactive, playful, and improvisatory. Cashious' emcee style might have been subconsciously influenced by previous experiences. He told me in his interview that many types of performers have influenced him: "I'm not motivated by just rap artists. I'm motivated by motivational speakers, and actors, and actresses. I don't care who it is." His influences contributed, perhaps subconsciously, to his performing identity on stage, and formed his development as a rapper, an emcee, and an actor. Many other students had also been influenced by social media's representations of Hip Hop culture, especially its heightened stage presence. Movement and use of the entire stage is a norm in Hip Hop.

Other forms of popular music also use heightened energy, but the students at HSRA freely and openly imitated popular Hip Hop's speech patterns and stage presence. Musical and technological components also imitated Hip Hop by using previously produced beats as the musical accompaniment. There were exceptions as some explored with trap music, reggaeton, and even country and western.

All of Cashious' performances reflected his genuine personality, speech patterns, and timbre of voice, which remained relatively consistent with his everyday behavior. The "performing personality" he developed—an identity where the personality traits of a performer are revealed through language, movement, and gestures (MacDonald, Hargreaves, & Miell, 2002)—also remained consonant in every way with his everyday persona. He did not assume a different one for the stage. I witnessed that students displayed a combination of performing personality, race, subconscious acts of influence, and acted upon free will as they explored their possibilities.

Implications for the Field

Literature on race and racism usually targets elite White males as the culprits who maintain racially oppressive systems. The United States' founding forefathers, the Constitution, and the evolution of the Constitution with all of its attendant amendments, are prime examples of White, male-dominated agendas and policies. Critical Race Theory was created in response to this history and targets racially biased laws and their keepers. Due to the history of racial inequality and its enforcement, elite White men are still, more often than not, thought of as the system's gatekeepers.

What is more commonly disqualified or ignored is how the middle class, the working class, the teacher, the assembly-line worker, and the average-income citizen who might not overtly support historically racist agendas, are still guided and managed by these policies. Until teachers recognize this, the music educational system will remain rooted in systemic values of White homogeneity. Although Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) offer remedies in their large and thriving music programs, and gospel-spiritual choirs exist in small liberal arts colleges across the nation, the educational system continues to support values that implement outdated and racially biased policies, segregating access to diverse opportunities. Until systemic exclusions and divisions are addressed, which currently promote racial prejudice, irrelevant curriculum, disengaging pedagogy, and lack of innovation it will be difficult to attract African American students to pursue music education degrees. It will be difficult to attract a diverse music-education faculty. It will also be difficult to even care, because privilege serves the privileged and is often used to denounce anybody who cannot attain it, placing blame on the "other." As Schaffer and Skinner (2009) say:

> Spaces are needed in which students and teachers (trained in antiracist pedagogy) can begin to unpack their assumptions, beliefs, and attitudes about human diversity and power; and recognize, acknowledge, and reflect on the multiple forms of cultural capital at work within various school contexts. To dismantle the structures and practices that construct and then privilege certain cultural and racial norms over others, and to encourage and support students in questioning discourses that essentialize and isolate people, teachers can begin to facilitate an understanding of how schools work (and fail to work) for different social groups and, ultimately, transform structures and practices that privilege certain cultural practices over others. Instead of silencing and disciplining students who do not conform to existing school norms. (p. 293)

Higher education music faculty must begin to discuss race with future music educators. Otherwise, matters of race will continue to be ignored as significant

constructions, and the privilege of the few will continue to be upheld, rendering it impossible to create a thriving arts community capable of collaboration and inclusiveness.

A partial remedy is for music educators to acknowledge and "resign from whiteness" (Spears et al., 1999, p. 16), questioning and re-questioning inequities in opportunity, curriculum offerings, and historic political agendas. Because race and racism are social constructs, it is possible to change outlooks and belief systems over time. And, as research shows, racial experience is fluid over generations, so it is also possible for the racial experiences and belief systems of music educators to change and evolve over time. But it takes a socially conscious effort to achieve such a task. It takes educators who are mission-minded and willing to re-examine their training and to question the inequities that students are often systemically subjected to, without denouncing their immediate life situations. It takes teachers to be workers for students without fear of reprisal from administrators for breaking the boundaries of existing standardizations. It requires self-actualiz(ing) educators who attempt to work through their biases and positions of privilege, no matter how difficult the work. And, although this self-actualization might not be possible for all "non-committed or conservative educators who do not believe that institutional marginalization exists" (Jones, 2001, p. 9), listening and questioning would at least create some progress, compared to "total inactivity" (p. 9).

As hooks (1994) states, faculty needs to "unlearn racism to . . . fully appreciate the necessity for creating a democratic liberal arts learning experience" (p. 38). This task might seem insurmountable, and more than what one education class or program can accomplish in a semester. But if the genesis of a music education program is equity and

inclusivity – and, for this research, racially focused—an underlying message will be "realness," as TJ says. An equitable and inclusive philosophy will eventually become evident in the music program, within the population of the student body; and in courses, course work, student projects, and how educators conduct their classrooms. Ultimately, it will affect not only their students but also the future of music education.

Ignoring inner reflection and failing to act on outward practical change reinforces racist behaviors through *acquiescence*. Educational constructed policies that continue to practice disengagement of African American students, and a failure to act upon change, supports racial oppression by default. No reform can occur. It reinforces privilege, *what* is deemed worthy of teaching, and *who* is deemed worthy of teaching. Social justice is often a broad term used to define aspects of in-equity, so I refer to Feldman and Tyson (2007), who believe that the field of music education cannot implement a social justice framework blindly. They therefore identify the need for an "explicit theoretical framework for social justice in order to inform 'who' it is taught, 'what' is taught, and 'how' it is taught to future school leaders" (p. 2). Ignoring such a framework ultimately ignores socio-political historical injustices that have contributed to our current state of affairs, and will continue to uphold music education in its current state.

It seems redundant to continue talking about high art forms deemed worthy of teaching and learning. What is worthy of discussion is exploring the possibilities of providing a creative learning environment, no matter *who* the creator is. Instead of focusing on what is considered "high art," let us focus on creating space for all students to flourish. Although this study focuses on African American student experience and expression, self-expression and reclaiming of self is for everyone. As stated in Chapter V,

“Why shouldn’t teaching be like this?” Why not offer a creative freedom of expression and hands-on, relevant, innovative curriculum? As educators, we must resist the call-and-response teaching model in favor of exploring intellectual, critical, and creative forms of engagement that students find valuable in becoming innovative beings. Traditional band, orchestra, and choir paradigms that allow time and space for innovation and exploration can challenge some students to branch out of familiarity—and, at the same time, offer others an opportunity to create, rather than duplicate.

Developing teaching strategies and creative spaces for innovation goes against standardized music education norms. If we encourage closed activities, we limit possibilities, but if we develop plans and classroom environments with “open” creative space, we will likely be co-creators with innovators, developing ideas we probably never imagined. This is creativity. Eventually, students will come to class and share of themselves. They will feel engaged with an environment that is relevant to a self-defined purpose, rather than one simply mandated by a teacher.

Encouraging a space for creative thought is imperative to education. Space can be interpreted as a place, a moment of time, and a frame of thought. Green (2000) suggests that aesthetic education focuses on that space, and what might happen there as a work of art is realized or fulfilled by the human beings who are present in terms of “who, not what” he or she is. Likewise, Christian Marclay is one of the many artists who incorporate this principle in their art. His concepts of space, and the sight and sound that co-exist in that space, are apparent in his open and free forum. The concept of traditional musical notation can, for him, be discarded, reinvented, reinterpreted, or used, if desired. There is no right or wrong; it just is. When we strip away expectations and allow students

the freedom to create self through their own creative process, we support the emergence of new thoughts and ideas. Fewer boundaries and expectations open the space for new possibilities.

Do music educators even care? What do we gain by providing an open canvas on which students may paint their world and their new worlds as they grow and change? We know that policymakers have historically diminished the importance of music education and eliminated it from programs. But the fact that research now shows that expanding curricular options engages a diverse student body, including traditionally separated racial groups, might begin to re-frame how a thriving music program can be qualified, as well as how it is perceived by leadership, families, and students. No longer would a teacher need to win the Lincoln Center Jazz Competition to be recognized as exemplary. Instead, a program that engages a socially, musically, racially, economically, all-gendered, multi-modal, and religiously diverse student body could serve as a new model of excellence. Educators who use this model would create ensembles of inclusion that accompany musical and artistic diversity. This would provide policy leaders with opportunities to recognize how the arts are vital for everyone—and how they contribute to innovation and creativity across all subjects, because all subjects would be infused into the arts program.

This study's location offered unique opportunities and resources often missing from general music programs, i.e., not all schools have the capabilities of building multiple studios. For this reason, the findings might be difficult to imagine and replicate within the standard music education design. With this said, it is still possible to create a music program that welcomes and appreciates the presence of innovative and creative beings throughout the school – not just those who function well in traditional music,

drama, or art departments. I envision a program where a Hip Hop ensemble can stand next to the concert band, which incorporates punk, who perform with the bluegrass ensemble, which includes some spoken-word pieces, who include the drama department, who compose a piece for the chamber orchestra, which is recorded by videographers who are also technologists, and is documented by photographers who release CDs that relate to literacy—and where the managers of each ensemble works with local entrepreneurial organizations to create even more opportunities. Distinctions are made, but there are no hierarchies. Policy leaders would have to reconcile their narrow view of education with such school-wide involvement and see the arts as a vital element in every student's education.

The breadth of such a program would affect the current structure of music teacher education: Each teacher would not have to be versed in bluegrass, Hip Hop; punk, and traditional band literature. Matters of race, privilege, hierarchy, creativity, exploration, productivity, exposure to these musical genres, and policy would need to be addressed. An inquisitive, reflective, and practical teacher education program is required if we are to inform a student teacher's future pedagogy and have him or her explore innovative options that affect her implementation of chosen curricula. This would also require a teacher to analyze how socio-political, racial positioning in life affects her teaching, and how policies create hierarchies within music education.

In 2014, technological advancements and accessibility never imagined continue to affect the constructing of music education, and for this reason, we must include multi-modal possibilities. Nevertheless, as Gustafson (2008) notes, much effort has been expended to maintain music curriculum as it is "currently structured" (p. 292). This

cannot remain true. Multi-modal literacy exploration is relatively easy to implement. It does not require an excessive amount of technology, although that helps, but what is really needed are the pedagogy and curricula that can create multi-modal exploration. Innovative ways of teaching must be created according to individual teacher's needs, class size, access to equipment, and the like. Creative teaching approaches are needed to meet the needs of the students. Students are not removed from technology – it is part of their daily lives. They enjoy hearing themselves on recordings, writing themselves into sound and video texts, no matter what race they may be. Multi-modal literacies encourage this.

Tommy talked about students' contributions and how they write themselves into history. He spoke specifically about how they serve the community and themselves—and how self-love is related to a desire for education: "In the end, what you realize the most, it's not even about valuing education first—it's really first valuing themselves" (May 24th). Think about how students at HSRA developed, explored, and created, ultimately becoming something they once were not. This becoming something different was reflected in their internal cultivation of the school's four core values: Family, Community, Respect, and Education. As educators, we need to reflect on the philosophies we bring into our schools and classrooms. What are our missions? What are our beliefs? Whom do we serve, and for what cause and what end?

Implications for Future Research

We have seen that environment affects students' engagement level, particularly for students of color. We have heard African American students talk about their different

educational experiences in White environments versus Black environments. For these reasons, exploring racial experience in music education environments as “a minority” or “a majority” contributes to our understanding of inclusion, division, culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy, and opportunity.

In keeping with this, I think of comparing the racially segregated marching competitions held by Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and the traditional corps-style marching competitions that are most often associated with White ensembles. It raises issues of constructed exclusivity and definitions of achievement. Both HBCUs and corps-style bands have access to competitions, both have score sheets, and both have standards of success that rate performances. Would it be possible to bring competitions together, while accepting their various avenues of expression, creation, improvisation, musical genres, and performance styles? First, we would need to find marching competitions that incorporate multiple styles of expression, understand assessment within these various performative styles, and understand student experience within this competition. This would give us insight into how racial inclusion and exclusion affect teaching, pedagogy, and standards of assessment.

Further research is needed to understand how creativity affects learning on the part of high school students, and would offer insight into what makes for successful engagement, teaching practices, achievement, and innovation. This work could also lead to new definitions of “success”—not only student success, but what policy defines and accepts as “success.”

Conclusion

Throughout this research, I have shown that life experiences are influenced by race, racial affiliation, and unjust policies that often affect past and present educational experiences. Race *does* matter to the students at HSRA, because they experience racialized identities and express race daily in their lives, through the arts. Perhaps they do so unintentionally and subconsciously, but they do. For students at HSRA, the African American environment was a partial reason for their increased engagement and sense of well-being. The fact that the school's philosophies put the well-being, education, and future of African American students at the front and center of their mission implies a love for the students as African American youth.

More important, however, I witnessed freedom at HSRA, where staff fostered the purposeful exploration and expression of racial identity, first and foremost by creating the school for African American students. It was also fostered by creating courses such as the *Urban Music and the Hip Hop History and the Arts* class. Purposeful exploration and expression was also embedded in personal learning plans or personal creations. The opportunity for students to initiate projects that centered on race and racism, racial profiling, segregation, living in urban poverty, homelessness, and mental health, among others—becoming critically conscious of their lives and surrounding was appreciated. The teaching, pedagogy, and implemented curricula contributed equally to student expression of self, and the students found this most valuable in creating an engaging learning environment. The freedom of expressing their African American identity with the by-product of being heard, validated, and appreciated through the arts is prized by the students. Their representation of voice contributed to a new becoming.

Allsup (2001) suggests that freedom requires an engagement with the world, a struggle with the limitations that can only partially define us:

> A liberatory practice of music education is located within a hypothetical or critical stance, a philosophical position that asks subjects to name their world. From such a stance may arise a sense of hope or possibility, even freedom. How, for example, might we uncover the possible within fixed conditions? What teaching strategies can help students break through unreflective and ossified thinking? A liberatory practice depends upon an engagement, even a struggle, with one's fate. (p. 3)

The findings and implications of this dissertation show clearly that the kind of liberating space that Allsup considers to offer a "sense of hope," also depends "upon an engagement"—and most notably, *encourages* engagement. To be sufficiently liberated to create and claim a space for freedom of expression, of voice, and of critical production, it is necessary to be an engaged, ready, and present. As individuals engage in acts of freedom, it is incumbent upon them to *act on* their freedom. Being listened to, acknowledged—even being dismissed—can result in promoting student engagement if students struggle through it. The struggle that it takes to "name their world" brings individuals closer to becoming aware of their own possibility of liberation.

I challenge the idea, however, that only a school created for African American students can accomplish such a task. Simply creating such a school does not automatically lead to students' engagement and sense of well-being. The school must also rely on teacher-student relationships, the teaching, and its pedagogy and curricula. I learned how previous educational experiences had inhibited students' vision for themselves. I saw it in their disdain for their previous schools, some of their previous teachers, and the disengaging curriculum they had experienced in the past. Students at HSRA had enacted previous disengagement with education by dropping out or getting

expelled, they had to struggle through it at HSRA and claim a new liberatory space for themselves. Many students also talked about their feeling of otherness as a "minority" in White schools. This contributed to Autumn's trying to act "White" in order to fit in. It wasn't until she met Cashious at HSRA that she was able, with his help, to realize her strength and beauty in being African American.

Muting students' voices had also taken place in their previous educational experience as previous teachers had affected their sense of self and their level of self-comfort. Even in Chicago's public schools, where "all the students were Black" (Cashious, Miles), "the teachers didn't give a damn—they just gave me an A for doing nothing" (Miles)! Disengaging curriculum, combined with low expectations and racism that was embedded in teaching and pedagogy, contributed to the annihilation of self-worth and realized contributions among these African American students –and, ultimately a disengaged educational experience. Becoming fully aware of the new possibilities for engagement awakened their self-productive capabilities. A complex relationship between freedom of exploration and racial expression; creative expression; innovation; access to a space where knowledge can be co-constructed, unlearned, and re-informed is necessary for an emancipatory education for African American students. This requires a struggle through these paths of self-creation and learning; and it requires a space that implements pedagogy and curriculum that encourage inner reflection and outer productivity to flourish. The arts, race, teaching, and surprise of learning contribute to who students are becoming and might become. Without a physical space in which they can safely explore, and an internal space that rewards self-reflection and the exploration of the contributions, students cannot realize freedom and possibility. This can be

especially meaningful for those who had lacked such a space of opportunity. A grass-roots school such as HSRA encourages freedom of exploration and awakens in students the possibility of freedom, all of which have nothing to do with standardized scores and achievement level.

Finale

I end the same way I began: by referring to Niles' *Hip Hop History and the Arts* class. Class is ending and students have not yet decided on a name for the CD. (Later in the summer, they decide to title it "The Next Move.") By the end of class, students are more rambunctious than at the beginning. They aren't out of control – they just show excitement about their songs they created and produced by themselves, which Niles just finished playing for them. "Where I'm Going" is one of my personal favorites, as it is for many other people. It is a stunningly beautiful vocal piece where the male and female voices weave harmonies and dance melodies around each other. The beat and the smooth male raps are seamlessly intertwined.

As the song ends, Niles stops the CD and reminds the students, "None of these songs ended the way they started. None of them. The video we shot yesterday [for this song], it's gonna be live! I can't wait…it's going to be so amazing!" Damien, the videography teacher, has joined the class for a moment:

> Man, I really feel like for this song, you all . . . had a *story*, that the *song* was stronger than the video could make it. So we really had to . . . try to step the video up to the level of the song. . . . I really want the editing process to reflect the real message you guys are bringing forth. Like, this is the type of song that can change peoples' lives! It may not seem like it! You might not think that it's that big, but really. This is the type of song that can change people's lives. Like really maybe end up on a movie score. . . . That's the type of power that these songs have. . . . Especially because you don't really get songs like these nowadays, you know. . . .

> You don't get the NAS' and the people that used to tell the story like Biggy and stuff. You all did it, but still with a *youthful* perspective! So it wasn't like an *old school* song. . . . No, it's a *new school song*, but still has that real Hip Hop. The real message based sound to it.

Referring to Dean, who was one of the main lyricists in the piece, a student adds, "Yeah, he just took it over the *top*! It's all real you know? Every word." Students acknowledge Dean with handclaps or pats on the back and Damien continues:

> Yeah, but it's not even half way there yet. Now is the fun part. . . . You guys gotta be thinking about how do you really want to bring out this message you know? Everything from color themes to different messages . . . We got people disappearing into *white* light at the end of the video you know? There's some deep stuff goin on. . . . It's *hot*! So anybody who wants to be down, and go through the video and start to think about the process for editing, *the door's wide open.*

This last scenario is a "real" representation of students who are offered an open space to create. The encouraging and heartfelt guidance, the supportive relationships and love for the students all helped them to value themselves as creative, productive contributors to society. This is something that all music programs should hope to achieve. The door is wide open.

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APPENDIX A

Student Interview Questions

Name:
How Long at School

Would you describe a day in the life of (Student Name) while you are here?

***Pedagogy*:** How are HSRA's philosophies illustrated through the teaching and learning process? What pedagogical means are enacted to attend to student learning and engagement? What are its intended ends?

Can you tell me a story about a memory you have with a teacher?

Is there anything you wish were different about the adult relationships here? Can you expand?

Can you tell me about some things your teacher/mentor expects of you?

Can you think of a time when you felt like you wanted more of a say or input in your musical activity? Can you expand on that?

***Curriculum*:** What curricula are implemented to attend to student learning and engagement? What are its intended ends?

Can you share with me an example of what you are currently working on?

Do you have final projects here and if you do, what do you think a final project looks like here?

Is reading and writing your music (your poetry) taught separately from other subjects here? For example, is the performance a different subject than maybe the business part of the program, or perhaps maybe is music history taught separately from performance or business, or musical writing? Can you give me an example of how?

***Institutional Identity and Race*:** *How* does HSRA foster purposeful exploration of racial identity? What institutional structures inhibit identity development and well-being?

Can you talk about a time or times, when race crosses your mind and/or talked about with your family, friends etc.?

Do you feel like you talk more about race at home, school, religious organization, friends, or through your artistic expression?

Race, Identity, and Creativity: How does creativity foster the exploration and development of learner identity? *How* do African American students—assuming they do—express their racial identity through their creative work?

Can you talk about whether or not you think race has had an impact on your art?

I'd love to hear about times when you felt like you have been able to express yourself freely, either about race, sexuality, family, etc.?

Will you give me an example or examples about some things that has happen here that make you want to come back and participate?

Can you describe for me one or two of your most enjoyable assignments you have had here?

Would you mind sharing with me IF and or HOW race has ever affected your artwork and creation in this school?

Are there things you are asked to do that help you express who you are as an Individual? Can you tell/sing/write me a few example, (Perform Something)

APPENDIX B

Teacher/Leader Interview Questions

Teacher Background Information:
What is your Name?
Can you describe your school for me?

***Pedagogy*:** How are HSRA's philosophies illustrated through the teaching and learning process? What pedagogical means are enacted to attend to student learning and engagement? What are its intended ends?

Can you talk about the schools philosophies

Describe what's it like to teach at this school?

Will you give me an example about some thing that has happened here that make you want to come back and teach in this particular way?

What are some obstacles you have faced in implementing your teaching philosophy?

Can you tell me about a memory you may have about a teaching experience and what was the main idea that stuck with you at this point?

Can you tell me some things you appreciate about your students here?

How do you define good teaching?

Can you tell me a story about any one of your students?

What are some obstacles you have faced as a teacher/administrator here?

***Curriculum*:** What curricula are implemented to attend to student learning and engagement? What are its intended ends?

Can you explain to me what some of your goals are for the school or class?

What do final projects look like here?

In what ways do you feel are some challenges in meeting the needs of students in your classroom?

Can you describe for me one or two of your most enjoyable assignments?

***Institutional Identity and Race*:** *How* does HSRA foster purposeful exploration of racial identity? What institutional structures inhibit identity development and well-being?

Can you give me some examples of ways you feel students explore their creativity?

Can you talk about how you have noticed students express their thoughts, ideas and explore possibilities and why do you think that is?

In your experience can you discuss differences/similarities between curriculum you use compared to standardized textbooks and curriculum?

Can you give me example if race or skin color is discussed, addressed or expressed in this organization?

Can you describe a moment where you felt empowered as an AfricanAmerican teacher?

Race, Identity, and Creativity: How does creativity foster the exploration and development of learner identity? *How* do African American students—assuming they do—express their racial identity through their creative work?

What/Who has been some influences in your life that contribute to your teaching expression?

Can you talk about whether or not you think your race has had an impact on your teaching?

Can you talk about if you've noticed students express their racial identity through this class? If so, how?

Can you talk about a time or times, when your race crosses your mind and/or talked about with your class? If so, in what ways, formal literature, curriculum, in classroom discussion, as side notes, humorous?

APPENDIX C

Focus Group Questions

The focus group will consist of 5-6 students. All participants will not have to be interviewed in order to participate in the focus group. These semi-formal focus group will be facilitated by the researcher, yet as natural progression may take place, the students will themselves be the main contributors of the conversation, sparking each other's responses, ideas, and thoughts.

Focus Group Meeting Framework

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1. Thank you all for participating in the focus group. Please remember that this is voluntary participation but I really appreciate you all being so dedicated and willing to participate.

2. So, really we are just here to talk about our experiences here in the program. This is an informal setting where we can all contribute to the conversation. Although we have to respect each other's time in talking, by not interrupting, it is still ok to comment and expand further a thought you may be having while somebody else is talking. Just keep your thought and feel free to expand on your thought without having to raise your hand. It's a free flow thought process.

3. Also, I'm going to ask for people to performance something if you choose and we can all discuss the performance.

4. I'm also going to be recording this and taking notes every once in a while which I listen to them again later.

5. Does anybody have any questions before we begin?

So, what is something you appreciate about this program?

Can you talk about some ways you may think that race is ever brought up in this program?

Can you think of ways this program encourages/discourages you?

Can you describe some of your courses for me?

Is there anything you wish were different in this school?

What were some of your past schools like?

How do you express yourselves as African American?

What do some of your projects look like?

What have you participated in? Can you describe the process for me?