My first introduction to the enactment of hip-hop culture as pedagogy occurred in my last semester of classes while working on my Masters at the Harvard Graduate School of Education (HGSE). I had one remaining elective course requirement to fill so I took a course on understanding global hip-hop identities. I decided to use this opportunity to venture onto the main campus, enrolling in a course on international hip-hop identities. Having an opportunity to understand personal struggles in identity development attracted me to anything involving an explicit exploration of the topic. I figured it would at the very least be a fun and interesting note on which to close out my time as a Harvard graduate student. The class was held in Harvard's newly opened Hip-hop Archive & Research Institute. The walls were covered with images of African American musicians, actors and their work (movie posters, album art, etc.). The space in which the actual instruction was performed was almost the complete antithesis of the antiquated, White-washed spaces I had come to expect from higher learning institutions, particularly Harvard.

Although school was always a space in which I experienced academic success, never before had I been so connected to academic content. On a daily basis we were asked to “come as who we were” and to truly think about how constructions of our identities (both our own and those others/society imposed upon us) shape our experiences while our experiences simultaneously shaped who we were. Together we explored the nuances of society, breaking down explicit and implicit messages of privilege, access, oppression and constructions of race, gender, and sexuality while always taking a moment to reflect on how we were positioned. It was a communal study of individual identities where each person felt supported in the discomfort of exploring the ways in which “who we were” in various spaces disrupted and in some cases reproduced the conditions for inequities to persist. Engaging in this level of critical analysis helped me find a new voice accompanied with a surprising sense of freedom and hope. I began to acknowledge the ways I played a role in my own oppression through the conscious and unconscious suppression of
various parts of my identity in an effort to “fit in” and adjust to my surroundings. Through this process of continued reflection and analysis I could easily see that I had within me the power to take action toward change.

1 Falling in Line

I carried this experience with me as I entered the classroom taking on the official title/role of “teacher.” Armed with the language of culturally relevant education, I developed a classroom vision around the goals of high academic achievement and the development of a critical consciousness that would foster a sense of urgency and a path to action leading my students to disrupt the status quo (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Noting my students’ attraction to and engagement with rap and hip-hop, and remembering the transformative experience from my course at Harvard, I attempted to recreate that space. As a Math/Science teacher I struggled to find ways to integrate some of the practices of my professor who taught the course on global hip-hop identities, unsure of where the work needed to start with my fifth graders. I finally settled on beginning with the use of rap as a hook to engage my students, looking to canned programs that used rap to teach students various skills such as multiplication and division tables. While initially this worked as a means to draw them in, it did very little to keep them engaged. I quickly began to feel the pressure of meeting demands amidst time constraints, mandates on the use of scripted curriculum and random administrative observations within the increasingly test-based competition-driven culture of my school (and public school culture at large). Feeling exhausted and unsupported, I abandoned my vision and did my best to fall in line with school, district and statewide requirements.

I find it difficult to reflect on my first year of teaching as it forces me to come face-to-face with the ways in which I believe I failed my students. It would be easy to place the blame solely on the culture of schools in which conforming to standardized practices designed around the social norms of society comes in direct conflict with many educators’ attempts at creating spaces that require and value culturally-specific ways of knowing and expressing knowledge (Nasaw, 1979; Kliebard, 2004). Unquestionably, these structural issues play a major part in teachers’ perceptions of their abilities to effectively engage in critical culturally responsive practices, and I think it is important for educators to acknowledge and name these potential constraints and barriers. However, I approach my current work and research with the stance that as “teacher” I played a central role in reinforcing and validating the barriers to enacting such praxis within the context of my classroom. Therefore, examining the shortcomings of my attempts to transform teaching