

**History Beyond the Textbook: Utilizing Hip Hop to Add New Narratives to Social Studies**

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**ABSTRACT**

**Published** December 31, 2024

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**DOI** <https://doi.org/10.29173/assert67>

**Pages: 11-22**

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The lived experiences of individuals are different. The historical implications and impact of events will differ depending on who is sharing their experience. As educators, we know the value of listening to stories of others and allowing voice and choice in the classroom. This article will highlight how we can incorporate Hip Hop culture, specifically emceeing, into the classroom to tell stories that are often overlooked in traditional textbooks and curriculum.

**Keywords**

hip hop; voice; resilience, narratives, history education; social studies

**How to cite this article (APA):** McLaurin, T. (2024). History beyond the textbook: Utilizing hip hop to add new narratives to social studies. *Annals of Social Studies Research for Teachers, 6(*2), 12-23. <https://doi.org/10.29173/assert67>

## INTRODUCTION

The United States is the “home of the free” and “land of the brave,” but that narrative is intricately linked to who is telling the story. Simply stated the lived experiences of Americans are different. For example, 74% of the Black American student population in the United States of America attended what is considered a mid-high or high poverty school in 2016 (Macfarland et al., 2019). This segregation along the lines of race and socio-economic status is alarming. The historical implications and impact of historical events may differ depending on who is sharing their experience within North American society.

As educators, we need to value listening to stories of others and allowing voice and choice in the classroom. This is a key element of being trauma informed (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration, 2014). Additionally, listening to other stories helps us build relationships with students, families, and communities in which we engage in the practice of teaching and learning. Listening to stories is also a critical element of history and creating narratives, such as the one of “home of the free” and “land of the brave” I referred to in my opening. How can we uplift voices that have often been silenced in our textbooks and narratives of history in educational spaces? Hip Hop can add a new perspective to the previously accepted narratives of history (Okello, 2020). This article will explain how we can incorporate Hip Hop culture, specifically emceeing, into the classroom to learn about how Black Americans have interacted with history, and continue to overcome oppressive circumstances (Akom, 2009), and tell stories that are often overlooked as teachable scenarios. The purpose of this article is to convey how educators can utilize rap lyrics as a consumable and view the artform of emceeing as a form of knowledge production.

## THE RESEARCH

**Hip Hop Culture**

We have 50 years of Hip Hop culture! This coincides with wars, shifts in the global economy, war on drugs, rise of the information era, and more. The elements of Hip Hop are often open to debate, but emceeing, deejaying, fashion, dance, and art are consistently held as five pillars of the culture (Akom, 2009). Educators should utilize Hip Hop culture to help students learn in the classroom. This is not a new concept as many scholars have explained how Hip Hop can be intertwined with pedagogical experience (Akom, 2009; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2002; Hall, 2017; Kirkland, 2008). The complex history of Black Americans is told regularly in Hip Hop music through emcees sharing their narratives (Hall). Ferreras-Stone (2022) highlights the necessity for educators to push learners to question who is telling the story and who else could be telling the story. Additionally, Ferreras-Stone states “…with repeated exposure to complex narratives, students can learn to notice when a voice is missing or has been silenced (p.18). Hip Hop culture is rich with complex narratives primed to shine in the classroom. Students can hear narratives that are often not told or analyzed in educational spaces.

Hip Hop, like any other culture, has many components along with dominant and subdominant cultures within. Five components of Hip Hop culture were mentioned earlier, but the definition of the culture is often fluid. This manuscript will focus on emceeing. Emceeing is “aesthetic placement of verbal rhymes over musical beats” (Alim, 2012, p.1063). What the Emcee (aka rapper, MC) communicates through their lyrics can help educators gain knowledge and have fruitful consumables for teaching.

## FINDINGS & IMPLICATIONS

**Counter Storytelling**

Counter storytelling, utilized within educational scholarship “as a form of resistance” (Miles, 2019, p.254), provides an alternative perspective from oppressive narratives through storytelling and personal narrative (Pender et al., 2023). Emcees can be counter storytellers and share their stories or stories of their community to counter the dominant culture’s oppressive stories about their communities. For example, next are a few lines from Jay-Z, Hip Hop Emcee, with a brief analysis.

“In the land of the free where the blacks enslaved, three-fifths of a man I believes the phrase/I’m 50% of D’usse and its debt free/I’m 100% of Ace of Spades, worth half a B” (Jay-Z, 2018, 3:41).

Counter storyteller Jay-Z does multiple things in four bars (four measures). He describes how he, a Black man, has felt the impact of some of the horror of American history while also pointing to how he has preserved in the system to create economic freedom for himself and others. Additionally, he praises his wife and fellow entertainer and entrepreneur, Beyonce, commonly referred to as “B” (a double entendre), who has also reached billionaire status. These few lines tell a story of resilience, family, entrepreneurship, and joy despite an oppressive history. This counternarrative provides hope and balance to the stories often told by data of black families in America, often without historical context. This example highlights how we can listen to counter storytellers share their personal and historical accounts.

To highlight the education potential in the bars shared by Jay-Z, The United States of America (USA) declared its independence in 1776 and created a constitution to govern the land in 1787 (Tsesis, 2016). This Constitution held beliefs and created structures that identified enslaved Africans as three-fifths of a person (Breyer, 2010; Connor, 2017; Goldstein, 2018). Shawn Carter, professionally known as Jay-Z, provides a rich counternarrative to this view. His ability to inspire hope and speak against the narrative of the “land of the free” is important for students from all backgrounds to hear.

We can utilize the voices of Hip Hop artists to enhance how we teach history and current events. Instead of focusing on the deficits of individuals or collective groups (e.g., Black students), we can discuss the impact of historical events that have contributed to the gaps we see in society through the narratives of Hip Hop artists. See Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Counterstories*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Topic | Lyrics | Artists |
| Redlining | “If the city wasn’t consumed by unexplained flames/it would eventually change due to imminent domain/how can you own a home if you can’t get a loan/and the powers that be just redlined your zone” (Sho Barraka, 2016, 1:13) | Sho Barraka |
| War on Drugs | “Instead of war on poverty/ they got a war on drugs so the police can bother me” (2Pac, 1998, 3:15) | 2Pac |

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Standardized Testing | “This pain I know firsthand, the grand learning moments, the innovative lesson plans, that cause eyes to sparkles as if them students just caught rides on shooting stars/ these lessons have wings, only to get clipped, to fit, into the Low-Res JPEG. You call “the state standards” why do you insist this is still the industrial age?” (Propaganda, 2014, 2:09) | Propaganda |
| Cultural Appropriation | “Some blame welfare/ some blame the music/ some blame the dealer/ some blame the user/ Turn on the news, lets figure out who we blaming/many benefit off my hood from not changing/ Exploiting my culture/ they aiding and abetting/ and it’s the black stock exchange/ they buying, and they selling” (Sho Barraka, 2016,2:54) | Sho Barraka |
| Greed | “The more you get, the more that you’ll desire, can’t quench your thirst/ of a conqueror, ask Alex, ask Christopher” (Cordae, 2022, 1:45) | Cordae |
| Racial Profiling | “Cops bust in with the army guns/ no evidence of the harm we done/ just a couple of neighbors that assume we slang/ only time they see us/ we be on the news in chains” (J. Cole, 2016, 2:11) | J. Cole |
| Glass Ceilings | Ah, whole world’s in awe/I crash through glass ceilings/I break through closed doors (Jay-Z, 2013, 1:25) | Jay-Z |

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Systemic racism, Lynching, civil rights | “What’s common is the consequences inconsequential/when supremacy is simple/underneath it all is tainted roots so strange fruit is not coincidental/how many times we’ve seen it?/ how many bodies the count is increasing?/ By the time that you find out you’re grieving/ the cycle’s repeating/this is American pie/this is the part when we barely surprised” (Swoope, 2024,:50) | Swoope |

The lyrics in Table 1 are filled with critical questions that teachers can ask their students as they grapple with historical and current events. For example, how did the shift in how cities were redlined and resources allocated impact schools? How do policies like redlining still impact schools, and how can students advocate for change?

## PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHERS

**Call to Action**

Be innovative! Incorporate Hip Hop lyrics to your lessons to enhance concepts that are being taught in your social studies courses such as redlining and primary sources, to name a few. Of course, all Hip Hop music might not be suitable for teaching, but when we bring in other voices we can learn about historical events and their impact. Provide spaces for your students to see themselves in the curriculum and learn about other cultures. Hip Hop is a culture with stories told by Emcees that can be fertile ground for teaching perspectives and personal narratives of historical events. If you are not familiar with Hip Hop culture, start by taking the time to learn the history of the genre. Teachers are resilient. During the global pandemic, educators showed that they can shift gears to meet the needs of their students in unprecedented times. Educators also can learn more about a culture that represents many of our students and is appreciated by even more.

When teaching historical accounts be sure to include voices from overlooked, oppressed, and silenced groups. The beauty in Hip Hop is that while there is discussion of the pain, suffering, and trauma that many individuals face there is also resilience and joy. This is a concept not foreign to any culture! As Sho Barraka states, “But a change gon’ come/ is what I tell the youngster/ this is a love song, I like to call it justice.” Let’s encourage our youth to learn from different perspectives, learn from our history, and push towards a future of greater justice and equitable outcomes for all students.

## Q & A WITH TRENT McLAURIN

### Question #1

#### Teacher’s Question:

Given that meaning is often hidden within lyrics of rap songs, what advice do you have/provide for teachers to make meaning of the rap lyrics they may, or may not, use in their classrooms?

#### Trent McLaurin’s Response:

If you think a song can supplement your teaching, look up the lyrics and do your homework! There are websites such as genius.com that often include background, meaning, and even the Emcees analysis of their own rap lyrics. Genius.com is an open source, similar to Wikipedia, so the information may need fact checking at times, but it will give you a starting point and help you to investigate the meaning of the songs.

### Question #2

#### Teacher’s Question:

What advice would you give to teachers that have never used Hip Hop in their pedagogical and curricular practices?

#### Trent McLaurin’s Response:

My biggest advice to teachers is to take the time to actively listen to what Emcees are saying. As mentioned in the article, Hip Hop is 50 years old! There are different eras or emceeing that might appeal to you, and most streaming devices have playlist and recommendations by decade or time period so “dig in the crates.” Sift through era’s, artists, and genres of Hip Hop to find fits for your classroom and content. In my experience I have incorporated country music and other genres that I am not familiar with into my teaching and learning due to the feedback and input from students. I say this because if you begin utilizing genres of music that you are familiar with to supplement your teaching, it may open the door for suggestions from your students on Hip Hop and other genres that you are less familiar with that you can use in your pedagogical approach.

### Question #3

#### Teacher’s Question:

How can Hip Hop lyrics be used to harm students? What advice do you have for teachers who may unknowingly reproduce oppression by using rap lyrics in their curriculum?

#### Trent McLaurin’s Response:

Do not force the issue. Do not use it if you are not picking up on the underlying meanings of songs or cannot find lyrics to compliment your instruction. Avoid the urge to use rap lyrics to check the box. Make sure you are aware of what the Emcee is discussing, and be mindful not to generalize the emcee's content to your students or Black and Brown communities as a whole. Also, ensure you engage with Hip Hop culture in a culturally relevant and sustaining way. Several competencies outline culturally relevant and sustaining education (CR-SE), such as Pennsylvania Department of Education’s CR-SE competencies. (<https://www.education.pa.gov/Documents/Teachers-Administrators/Certification%20Preparation%20Programs/Framework%20Guidelines%20and%20Rubrics/Culturally-Relevant%20and%20Sustaining%20Education%20Program%20Framework%20Guidelines.pdf>).

### Question #4

#### Teacher’s Question:

You mention the first 50 years of Hip Hop? What do you feel the next 50 years may offer for teaching and learning? To Social Studies?

#### Trent McLaurin’s Response:

Hip Hop culture provides so much that can be used to impact teaching and learning for the next 50 years. While this article focuses primarily on the Emcee, educators can look at fashion, art, knowledge creation, debates, music production and more through the lens of Hip Hop culture. We can analyze how different generations used expressions of counter storytelling in the past to help student understand how to use their voice to speak on current events.

### Question #5

#### Teacher’s Question:

What are some examples of the essential question(s) relating to these historical issues? Questions that educators can use as a guide to develop their own inquires.

#### Trent McLaurin’s Response:

* How has redlining shaped the demographics of student population in North American classrooms?
* Do our resources teach about redlining? From what perspective is redlining discussed in our textbooks?
* How did the War on Drugs impact different communities in the United States of America? How did these policies influence how we view rules in our society?
* Has standardized testing impacted our social studies curriculum?
* What is the history of cultural appropriation globally? How, if it all, has social media led to a rise of cultural appropriation?

### Question #6

#### Teacher’s Question:

What are the possibilities of implementing this framework for lower elementary grades such as K-2?

#### Trent McLaurin’s Response:

There are great resources such as Joolztv (<https://joolstv.com/>), Gracie’s Corner (https://graciescornertv.com/), and others that incorporate Hip Hop into early childhood competencies. I have co-authored an article that discusses using rap lyrics as mentor text utilizing songs from Gracie’s Corner. The stories told through mainstream (e.g. what is played on radio, streaming playlist) sources may not be appropriate for K-2nd grade, but there are ways to encouraged students to share their stories and learn how different experiences can lead to different perspectives.

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**Trent McLaurin**

I am Dr. Trent McLaurin, an Assistant Professor of Education at La Salle University in Philadelphia, PA. With extensive experience as a teacher, case manager, behavioral specialist, and director of special education, I aim to bridge the gap between practical and theoretical knowledge in education for practitioners.

I am passionate about providing strong support for all students, particularly marginalized youth, and ending the school-to-prison pipeline. I believe in the importance of professional development for educators by experts who understand both education and mental health. My combination of practical experience and academic research drives my commitment to making support accessible for front-line educators, families, and community providers.

Outside of my professional pursuits, I am always up for a debate on sports and music. As an avid sports fan, I enjoy all sports at all levels. I love listening to music—my first love, as you might guess from my articles, is hip hop, but I enjoy all forms of music today. I also enjoy playing guitar, watching movies, traveling, and most of all, raising my two boys with my wife.

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