

**Reading & Listening with Purpose: Teaching Controversial Song Lyrics**

**Using the ELA Common Core Standards in History / Social Studies**

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**Abstract**

This paper presents a method for social studies teachers to incorporate song lyrics into the study of controversial historical events and issues. Using the Hunt and Metcalf “Seven Problematic Areas of the Social Studies” as the rubric for selecting appropriate songs, the Teacher Candidate (TC) explains how song lyrics make viable text sources which convey a point of view. The TC also demonstrates the correspondence between song lyrics as text source material and the argumentative dimension of the *ELA Standards in History / Social Studies*. The educative potential for incorporating song lyrics in the social studies and complementing their use with other primary and secondary text sources is also discussed.

*Key Words:* controversial song lyrics, text source, teacher candidate, *ELA Standards in History/ Social Studies*.

## **I. Introduction**

The ELA Common Core Standards in History/ Social Studies (ELA CSHSS, henceforth) call for a deep integration of literacy skills in the social studies classroom (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers [NGACBP, CCSSO], 2012). Many of these skills include interpreting primary sources and drawing analytical conclusions about point of view (POV, henceforth) and purpose. However, combining these literacy skills with social studies content is not as easy as it seems. Keeping students' interest and finding grade-level appropriate, relevant readings is pivotal to learning. How do teachers find such sources? One place that many do not think to look is in song lyrics. There is an array of songs that offer first-person accounts of historical events and issues, representing a side of public opinion.

Song lyrics portraying historical, cultural, and political subjects often disclose controversial issues and opinions. Some teachers may be reluctant in using and discussing song lyrics with their students because they may fear parental backlash, student quarrels, and administrative disapproval over the use of certain song lyrics and topics they choose to discuss in their classrooms. However, well-structured discussions connected with the curriculum helps to increase students' content knowledge, reflection skills, and democratic competence (Hess, 2010). More specifically, discussion of controversial topics and issues using song lyrics, scaffold students' understanding of past and present events while providing "ample opportunities for [making] meaningful connections" to their lives (White & McCormack, 2006, p. 124).

The pertinence of using song lyrics in social studies may increase as the ELA CSHSS begin to enter and redefine the social studies classroom. Teachers will be devising new ways to

teach their content and selecting new, fresher relevant resources for their students. As such, the use of song lyrics can spark motivation in the social studies classroom (White, 2005). Songs from many generations and from many points of view allow students to delve deeper into the emotional, social, and political aspects of historical events. By supplementing lectures and traditional readings with empathic song lyrics, students can make connections between the sentiments they experience today and the sentiments tied to a specific historical event or issue (Whitmer, 2005).

The introduction of the ELA CASHSS may also cause teachers to re-examine their curriculum and consider using issues-centered approaches in order to complement the argumentative dimension of the standards. The reading standards contained in the ELA CASHSS call for students to distinguish between primary and secondary sources and to analyze an author's POV. Reading from multiple sources and sifting through historical evidence cause students to generate compelling, sometimes controversial questions. The ELA CASHSS standards contain an argumentative component to its text types and purposes for writing which allow students to hone-in on a perspective they wish to pursue and defend. Finally, the ELA CASHSS presents an argumentative dimension in the speaking and listening standards for comprehension and collaboration as well as in the presentation of ideas and knowledge (NGACBP, CCSSO, 2012).

Song lyrics represent an important and culturally relevant text source in an issues-centered social studies curriculum, having the potential for enhancing students' knowledge and skills of content and for meeting the expectations of the ELA CASHSS standards. Selecting appropriate song lyrics exhibiting a specific POV on an historical event or issue may be more

arduous than selecting traditional sources, however. To gauge selection of appropriate song lyrics to use in the classroom, the teacher should carefully assess the lyrics' message, content relevancy, and POV expressed. One way to assess song lyrics' viability for classroom use is to utilize a framework developed by Maurice Hunt and Lawrence Metcalf (1968) which provides seven problematic areas of the social studies. To determine a topic or issues' problematic status, Hunt and Metcalf applied two tests, one, is the topic "*ridden with uncertainty?*" and two, does the topic have the propensity to elicit closed or narrow opinions (Hunt & Metcalf, 1968, p. 293)?

The 7 problematic areas of the social studies are:

- 1) power and the law;
- 2) economics;
- 3) nationalism, patriotism and foreign affairs;
- 4) social class;
- 5) religion and morality;
- 6) race and minority group relations;
- 7) sex, courtship, and marriage.

## II. Classroom Application of Song Lyrics as a Text Source

Song lyrics hold value as primary sources, as seen in the following example unit taught in a rural Eastern Kentucky sixth grade social studies classroom in which two co-teachers were present: a Cooperating Teacher (CT) and a Teacher Candidate (TC). While studying European geography, the CT felt that the students lacked familiarity with major political and cultural events that shaped much of modern Europe. The CT's aim was to have her students explore Europe in a way that would interest them, as well as activate their higher-level thinking skills, such as analysis and evaluation. Events of the Cold War, while possibly controversial to teach, had great potential to connect the students' understanding of European history and geography. The CT and TC decided upon the following Kentucky social studies content standards for grade six (Kentucky Department of Education [KDE], 2012) in which to develop a mini-unit about the Cold War:

SS-06-1.1.1 Students will compare purposes and sources of power in the most common forms of government (monarchy, democracy, republic, dictatorship) in the present day;

SS-06-2.1.1 Students will explain how elements of culture (e.g., language, the arts, customs, beliefs, literature) define specific groups in the global world of the present day and may result in unique perspectives;

SS-06-2.3.1 Students will explain how conflict and competition (e.g., political, economic, religious, ethnic) occur among individuals and groups in the present day.

The CT and TC also selected the following NCSS standards:

1-Culture;

2-Time, Continuity, and Change;

5-Individuals, Groups, and Institutions;

6-Power, Authority, and Governance (National Council for the Social Studies

[NCSS], 2010).

To ascertain the students' prior knowledge about the Cold War, the TC (who was the lead teacher of the mini-unit) conducted a pre-assessment which consisted of a discussion about the term, "Cold War." The TC solicited students' thoughts about possible meanings of the term and recorded their ideas into thought bubbles displayed on a dry erase board. The TC applied the Hunt and Metcalf framework when selecting songs for possible use, and decided on *99 Red Balloons*, recorded by the German rock band, Nena, as a text source because of its distinct anti-nuclear war perspective. The story of the song follows a young girl who bought a bag of red balloons in a toy store with a friend. When they set the balloons free in the air, satellites detected movement in the sky. In the hype and fear of the Cold War, the balloons were mistaken for enemy bombs. Government officials in the song ordered to counter-attack the supposed threat, and the theory of "mutually assured destruction" (MAD) was applied, leaving at least two countries in ruin. The end of the song alluded to the death of the protagonist's friend in the bombings. Although the song lyrics aptly portrayed Hunt and Metcalf's problematic area, "nationalism, patriotism, and foreign affairs," the lyrics also brought into question issues having to do with ethics (e.g., religion and morality). The pathos-driven argument of the song, along with its pop-culture references and international popularity in 1983 and 1984 made this song both interesting for students, as well as relevant as a primary source, showing a clear POV that was widespread among 1980s youth.

The TC selected the ELA CSHSS standard, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.6-8.6 *Identify aspects of a text that reveal an author's point of view or purpose* for utilizing *99 Red Balloon* as a text source for this mini-unit. The TC's intention was for the lyrics to encapsulate the

anxieties of young people during the Cold War. Day one of the mini-unit began with the students using character cards in groups of 6-8 (Fig. 1). The characters represented people of differing ages, income levels, and nationalities. After reading their viewpoint aloud to the group, the students debated the ethics of using the nuclear bombs to end WWII. Some students, such as those representing the parent of a US soldier, were led to argue for the use of nuclear bombs, while others, such as those representing a young Japanese girl, were led to argue against. Using a new prompt and representing different characters, the students repeated the activity with a focus on Cold War events. In their given roles, they discussed the effects the Cold War had on them personally and their countries. The TC intended that the dissonance that occurred during this exercise would result in students' increased empathy for persons experiencing the Cold War in areas of different cultural and political backgrounds.

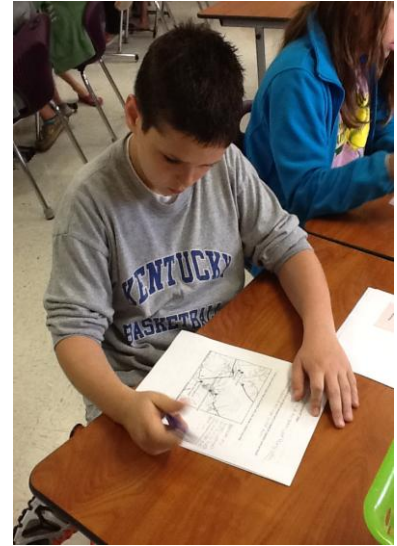


Figure 1

After their group discussions on day one, the TC introduced the students to a pre-reading activity known as “story impressions.” In this activity, students wrote a prediction of the events and plot of the story conveyed in *99 Red Balloons* lyrics and which were based on carefully selected terms or phrases from the text. This strategy tapped into the schemas the students had surrounding the terms, and it served as a metacognitive tool as the students assessed their thoughts throughout the learning process (Denner, Rickards, & Albanese, 2003). The students were unaware that the text source was in the form of a song. The TC modified the story impressions in order to serve 3 purposes. First, the TC used the story impressions strategy as a



text prediction and implemented it prior to the actual lessons about the Cold War. Second, the TC used the story impressions to check students' connections between activities they would engage in during the Cold War lessons to determine whether their predictions had been altered or not. And third, the TC used the story impressions to assess students' understanding of the song lyrics and of the Cold War following the completion of their activities and discussing the song as a class. Thus, the TC's modified story impressions consisted of a four-column worksheet; the first column being the given phrases/terms selected from the song, *99 Red Balloons*, the second their predicted story, the third any changes they wanted to make after studying the Cold War, and the fourth was the actual plot of the song as they understood it.

On the second day of instruction, the students participated in a "mini-museum" (Fig. 2). Groupings of classroom desks represented different "exhibits" that the students were to visit.



Figure 2

Each exhibit represented a major theme of the Cold War; these themes included WWII, science and technology, culture, armed conflict in other countries, and the Berlin Wall. These exhibits consisted of primary source documents such as magazine articles and photographs, as well as secondary sources such as poems and maps, fulfilling the ELA CSHSS

standard CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.6-8.9 *Analyze the relationship between a primary and secondary source on the same topic.* Each exhibit had four resources that went along with it, as well as questions for the students to answer in a corresponding packet. The students visited each exhibit with their group, and analyzed the materials, answered questions, and participated in

activities. The TC's intention for the mini-museum was to provide a more discovery approach to explaining the facts of the Cold War, including military engagements, scientific and technological developments, and political divisions.

By the third day of instruction, the students had a better understanding of the Cold War. The TC introduced *99 Red Balloons* as a primary source to her students and explained to them that songs can convey important stories and POVs about historical events and issues. Prior to listening to the song *99 Red Balloons* and discussing its relevance to the Cold War, the students' answered questions about the lyrics' vocabulary in order to assure they understood the words' meanings. Next, each student received a copy of the song's lyrics and the TC explained to them that they would listen to the song two times. The TC played the song without interruption the first time around and asked her students to highlight words from their story impressions in the song lyrics. Following the song, the TC called on volunteers to explain what they thought occurred in the song and its connection to the Cold War. They understood that a girl and her friend bought balloons and released them in the sky. They also understood that a military attack took place and destroyed the city this girl lived in, but the students were unclear on the connection between the two events. The students were asked to think about the mini-museum from the previous day and then were prompted with the following questions:

- *What did we learn about satellite technology during the Cold War?*
- *Why do you think leaders would have panicked if they saw flying objects in the sky during the Cold War?*
- *What was MAD theory?*

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- *What do you think would have happened if one group thought they were under attack?*

After answering these questions, the students drew the correct conclusion that the large number of balloons in the sky appeared to be missiles when identified by satellites, and, due to the high stress levels of the time, this would have caused an immediate military counter-attack.

The TC played the song a second time after it was determined the students understood the message in the lyrics, but this time pausing the song every verse or so to discuss what was taking place and how it represented the anxieties and events of the Cold War. For example, after the phrase,

Ninety-nine knights of the air  
 Riding super high-tech jet fighters  
 Everyone's a super hero  
 Everyone's a Captain Kirk

the TC led a discussion concerning why jet fighter pilots would be considered heroes, as well as who “Captain Kirk” was and what he represented in the song.

After listening to the song the second time all the

Chain of Events	Day One: My Story	Day Two: Inferences about connection to Exhibits	Day Three: Compare song to my story: What did I learn about these words
Balloons	One day at the park I bought some balloons. The summer sky was a baby blue and clear. A few minutes later, I panicked a little because my balloon popped.	Panic would mean the people are frightened or scared about the nuclear bombs. Also, super hero would mean the person that stopped the cold war. Ministers would be like a government leader.	The song talks about the girl and her friend. Their friend was killed in the bombing. So, she gets a red balloon as a souvenir to remember her city that was bombed. The panic was because of the attack, war machine to represent a gun.
↓			
Summer Sky			
↓			
Panic			
↓			
War Machine			
↓			
Ministers			
↓			
Super hero			
↓			
Souvenir			

Figure 3

way through, the students filled out the last column of their story impressions (Fig. 3). This time, they explained the actual meaning of the words in terms of the song *99 Red Balloons*. This acted as the formative assessment of the students’ understanding of the song, fulfilling the ELA

CCSHSS standard, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.6-8.1 *Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources.* However, in order to be an effective teaching method, the students had to be able to connect the song to what they had been learning about the Cold War and express how the song's lyrics represented youth emotions at the time. To assess this higher level of understanding, the TC had the students complete a writing prompt about the Cold War in their journals from the POV of a young person living in the 1980s.

The students' journal responses demonstrated that this particular song's lyrics was an effective text source to teach about anti- nuclear war attitudes and anxieties held by youth during the Cold War. While interviewing students following the mini-unit, one student responded to the TC's interview question, *do you think using song lyrics helps you to understand historical events better?* In reply, this student said, "Yes, because it would get stuck in my head and be catchy. It would be easier to link all the information in my brain because if I could link it to a song it would be so much easier." While none of the students interviewed had heard of the Cold War prior to this mini-unit, they were able to describe the Cold War in a sentence, one student saying, "There were all these bomb threats from the Soviet Union and from us over to there, so it was kind of crazy."

### **III. Discussion**

Although *99 Red Balloons* proved successful in capturing students' interest and helping them to understand a complex period in history, using song lyrics as a text source does have some limitations. First, used in isolation from other sources, song lyrics have the potential for causing student misunderstanding of events and issues. In order to help students construct a

more complete understanding of events, teachers should purposefully link song lyrics to other primary and secondary sources. Second, *99 Red Balloons* met the test for selection using the Hunt and Metcalf problematic areas framework, but metaphoric and abstract depictions of events and perspectives in lyrics may present challenges for some adolescents. The TC anticipated this to be the case, and conducted a pre-reading exercise (e.g., story impressions), clarified the meaning of the song by discussing unfamiliar and special words, and scaffolded students' understanding during and following the song with carefully worded questions and connections to previous lessons during the unit.

By analyzing for POV and purpose, as well as making clear connections to the events occurring during the Cold War, students approached the song as they would any primary source (Mastin, 2002). Songs such as *99 Red Balloons* give students an opportunity to hear the opinions of minority groups and marginalized peoples, such as youth, therefore making for a more complete understanding of an event (White & McCormack, 2006). The mini-unit described in this paper achieved that goal because the TC deliberately helped students to analyze the message in the song and its relationship to the anxieties of youth in the 1980s. Similarly, White & McCormack (2006) posited,

“As students transition from simply listening to music for enjoyment to evaluating the artists' messages, there are ample opportunities for meaningful connections, but only if the educator is willing to translate the popular culture into the dominant culture's terminology, which requires students to perform at higher cognitive levels than those expected in standards-based curriculums, but it epitomizes education that is aimed at teaching democratic values” (p. 124).

The students' democratic skill development was another important outcome of this mini-unit.

The collaboration, role – playing, and deliberating POV during the mini-museum were certainly

illustrative of the TC's natural proclivity to incorporate democratic skills into the daily instructional process.

In closing, selecting song lyrics using Hunt and Metcalf's problematic areas of study favorably corresponds with the expectations of the ELA CCSHSS standards. Although the ELA CCSHSS do not specifically identify the use of song lyrics as a text source for use in social studies classrooms, their pertinence and relevance in helping history come alive for students is nonetheless real. The TC's use of controversial song lyrics, such as *99 Red Balloons* discussed in this paper, helped to develop students' literacy skills, as expected by the ELA CCSHSS, and helped to create an environment conducive to democratic skill development and inquiry. The anti-nuclear war song enabled a group of sixth grade students to interpret, gather information, and form POV about the Cold War --- an event that they lacked prior knowledge of going into the mini - unit. If teachers choose to incorporate song lyrics as text source material consistent with literacy-based standards, hopefully this paper achieved its purpose for demonstrating a theoretical framework for which to select songs, for connecting the lyrics with the standards, and for making learning relevant and meaningful for students.

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