

By **TONYAA WEATHERSBEE**
The Times-Union

Once upon a time, Vincent Taylor was more into Run-DMC than Dr. Seuss.

"Back in the day, they used to call me Smooth Rappin' Kid," said Taylor, who spent a lot of time as a teen listening to rap. "Then I moved on to Prince Vince."

"It was a dream I had, to be on the big stage."

But after graduating from Lee High School in 1985 Taylor, who is now 40, figured out that a career in rap probably wasn't going to happen for him. Still, he kept his passion for it, but fit it into another story line for his life.

That story line took him out the studio and into the classroom.

Today Taylor is an elementary schoolteacher — and the author of a series of children's books centered on a character named Cornbread, a precocious schoolboy whose experiences mirror those of many other young children. And Cornbread often shows up and joins in as Taylor launches into raps and rhymes designed to teach children to read.

At Pinedale Elementary School recently, Taylor stood before a roomful of rambunctious summer campers and led them in a session on how to use context clues to figure out the meaning of a word.

"How many of you are familiar with context clues?" Taylor asked. More than a few raised their hands.

Then they got up to rap and act it

out. All to a catchy beat.

"First we look a little before the word," he said, as part of the posse of kids put their hands to their foreheads as if searching for something.

"Then we look a little bit after the word. Then we ... check for clues!"

It's all designed to show children how to discern main ideas: "Topic, topic, main idea ... supporting details, it's all in here!"

Taylor tests the kids as he goes along to see what they've picked up on. "The biscuits were hard as a rock. ... The pancakes tasted like cardboard. ... The chef couldn't cook."

Most raised their hands in agreement that the last statement reflected the main idea.

Seeing that thrills Taylor.

"The epitome of learning for kids is being engaged and excited," he said. "Anytime I step in front of a class, I want to give all my energy to the kids."

'Hip-hop saved my life'

Taylor's own learning experiences didn't begin with him being engaged and excited; they started with him being stigmatized.

As a boy, Taylor said, he was placed in the slow readers' group at his school. He thinks he struggled with reading because there wasn't a variety of reading materials in his home.

"We had Good Housekeeping magazine and the Bible, but that was about it," he said. "I wasn't immersed in enough literature as a child."

Taylor began to read more as he got older, but the thing that really fueled

his interest in reading and the power of words and stories was the emergence of rap.

"In 1983, I was listening to Run-DMC's 'It's Like That ... And That's the Way It Is,' and I liked the way that the words played off each other," Taylor said. "I thought: 'I need to be a part of that.'"

For a while, Taylor had planned to be a part of it. But he soon learned that cutting demo CDs and studio time was expensive. So even as he was loving rap, he was also looking into other professions — with the help of his counselor at Florida Community College at Jacksonville.

"I told him that I wanted his job," Taylor said. "He told me, 'If you want my job, the first thing you have to do is become a teacher.'"

So Taylor went to the University of North Florida and graduated with a teaching degree. He had his sights set on ultimately parlaying that into a counseling job.

Then he went into the classroom. And he hasn't looked back since.

"My first year, in 1996, at John Love Elementary I was teaching fifth-graders reading and math," Taylor said. "I saw the students struggling with reading, and I knew that when you hook that with an emotion or something they're familiar with, they can't let go."

Taylor knew that, he said, from his own experience.

"Hip-hop saved my life," he said. "It

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Vincent Taylor leads a rap in his interactive session on reading, called Reading, Rappin' and Having Fun, at Pinedale Elementary.



Gabriel Lazaeer hugs the character Cornbread during his and author/teacher Vincent Taylor's recent visit to Pinedale Elementary.