

# Teaching Reading

## Singing and songwriting support early literacy instruction

John A. Smith

Daddy's taking us to the zoo tomorrow,  
Zoo tomorrow, zoo tomorrow,  
Daddy's taking us to the zoo tomorrow,  
And we can stay all day.

Twenty-three emerging readers enthusiastically singing Tom Paxton's song *Going to the Zoo* (1997, Rounder Records) don't realize that they are reinforcing important reading skills as they follow along with a classmate who points to the lyrics printed on chartpaper.

Advocates of the arts in education have linked art, music, dance, and drama activities to a variety of academic, social, and personal benefits for students (Dean & Gross, 1992; Eisner, 1992; Hanna, 1992). Meta-analyses of arts education research studies suggest that music activities in particular are strongly associated with nonmusical curricular outcomes. Music activities can enhance students' academic performance (Miller & Coen, 1994), social skills (Surace, 1992), and content learning (Kassell, 1997).

Music activities can also complement a wide range of literacy learning activities. Educators have suggested ways to use music to help students learn alphabet sounds and letters (Page, 1995), develop phonemic awareness (Ericson &

Juliebo, 1998; Yopp & Yopp, 1997), and build vocabulary (Jalongo & Ribblett, 1997). McCracken and McCracken (1998) describe activities for using nursery rhymes and songs to teach print conventions and basic spelling patterns. Fountas and Pinnell (1999) recommend having students "sing songs of such delight that the lyrics remain in the memory forever" (p. 92).

The purpose of this article is to provide examples of singing and songwriting activities that can support early literacy instruction in the areas of letter names and sounds, phonemic awareness, print conventions, background knowledge, vocabulary, decoding, and writing. Readers should adapt and expand upon these ideas to create their own singing and songwriting literacy activities.

### Letter names and sounds

Millions of English-speaking children have learned the names of the alphabet letters more easily because someone set them to the tune of *Twinkle Twinkle Little Star*. Once students have learned to sing the ABC song confidently, they can learn to recognize the printed alphabet letters using an ABC song chart with the alphabet letters printed (vowels in blue) in a configuration that matches the song (see Figure).

Pointing to the letters on the ABC song chart while singing the song helps my students establish a visual representation for each letter. This also helps them learn that *lmnop* is not a single letter. Follow-up activities to further rein-

### ABC song

a	b	c	d
e	f	g	
h	i	j	k
l	m	n	o
q	r	s	p
t	u	v	
w	x		
y	z		

Now I know my ABCs  
Next time won't you sing with me?

force learning of the letter names include having students chant the letter names as the teacher points to them in random order, and matching activities with alphabet letter cards or plastic magnetic letters. As students become familiar with the letter names, they can use letter cards to reconstruct the ABC song chart on the floor or a tabletop.

Ericson and Juliebo (1998) provided many suggestions for adapting familiar songs and nursery rhymes to teach letter names and sounds. For example, my students and I have enjoyed singing the following adaptation to the tune of *Old MacDonald Had a Farm*:

Old MacDonald had some (chickens, cheese, chocolate)  
ee-i-ee-i-oh  
With a *ch*, *ch* here  
And a *ch*, *ch* there  
Here a *ch*, there a *ch*,  
Everywhere a *ch*, *ch*  
Old MacDonald had some (chickens, cheese, chocolate)  
ee-i-ee-i-oh.

I've also used *Twinkle Twinkle Little Star* to help my first-grade beginning

readers understand that vowel letters make both long and short sounds. I printed the following words on chart paper, sang them with my students, then distributed copies of the song in the form of individual booklets that children illustrated, read to one another, and took home.

#### Short and Long Vowel Song

Short A sounds like *bat bat bat*,  
Long A sounds like *bait bait bait*.  
Short E sounds like *set set set*,  
Long E sounds like *seat seat seat*.  
Short I sounds like *bit bit bit*,  
Long I sounds like *bite bite bite*.  
Short O sounds like *knot knot knot*,  
Long O sounds like *note note note*.  
Short U sounds like *cut cut cut*,  
Long U sounds like *cute cute cute*.

In between each verse we sang the chorus:

Vowels are short and vowels are long,  
Oh we love to sing this song.

### Phonemic awareness

Singing is a fun way for students to learn that letter sounds can be manipulated and recombined to create many spoken words (Ericson & Juliebo, 1998; Yopp & Yopp, 1997). The popular traditional song *Oopples and Boo-noo-noos* (Yopp & Yopp, 1997) gets students to create silly new words as they substitute the five long vowel sounds into the words, "I like to eat eat eat, apples and bananas."

I like to ate ate ate, ay-pples and bay-nay-nays  
I like to eat eat eat, ee-pples and bee-nee-nees.

A similar lively song, *B-A-Bay*, by the 1960s folk trio The Limelighters requires students to substitute consonant sounds to make the verses. Each time we sing this song I let the class choose eight favorite consonant letters that I write on the board. We alternate singing two verses and then a chorus. My students often find it hilarious to see what the last two words of each verse will be (*boo boo, moo moo, zoo zoo*, etc.).

B	A	bay
B	E	be
B	I	biddybye
B	O	bo
Biddy	bi	bo
B	U	boo
Biddy	bi	bo
Boo	boo	

### Print conventions

A wonderful way to teach left-to-right, top-to-bottom, and punctuation skills is a musical version of the language experience approach (Nelson & Linek, 1999). I select a popular song in which the first line is repeated several times such as *The Farmer in the Dell* or *She'll Be Coming Round the Mountain* (see the list of repetitive songs in the Sidebar). We then choose a favorite line, and the students will suggest words to substitute for a rewritten version. For example, in the song *Skip To M'Lou*, the structure of the line "chicken in the breadpan pickin' out dough" lends itself well to original rewriting, focusing on the verse's elements of animal (chicken), place (in the breadpan), and action (pickin' out dough). My students have come up with a variety of original lines such as "Cow in the bedroom sleeping on the bed." We sing each line three times followed by the words "Skip to M'Lou my darling" to constitute a verse. We also sing the chorus between verses. As in the language experience approach, I write the students' dictated words on chartpaper, commenting on directionality, letters and words, sentences, and punctuation. Our follow-up print activities such as matching word cards and sentence strips and making individual illustrated song booklets provide further opportunities for helping teach and reinforce print conventions.

### Background knowledge and vocabulary

As emergent readers hear, sing, discuss, play with, and write songs they are building important background knowledge that they will draw upon during later reading and writing experiences. With each new song, students learn concepts and word meanings that they will encounter in print (Foye & Lacroix, 1998; Gilles, Andre, Dye, & Pfannenstiel, 1998). For example, while learning the popular song *Grandma's Featherbed* my students learned words, concepts, and idioms including *tick, ballad, bolt of cloth, soft as a downy chick, and cobwebs filled my head*. Similarly, while laughing and singing *Clementine*, they learned words and

concepts including *cavern, canyon, excavating, mine, and forty-niner*.

I also teach my students background knowledge and vocabulary through writing and singing simple songs that contain content concepts. I write several informational phrases (transportation is moving things around) about a topic and set them to the melody of one of the repetitive songs in the Sidebar. For example, using the tune of the chorus of *Glory, Glory, Hallelujah*:

Transportation is moving things around,  
Transportation is moving things around,  
Transportation is moving things around,  
Things and people move from town to town.  
Ships carry goods across the ocean,  
Ships carry goods across the ocean,  
Ships carry goods across the ocean,  
And bring them to our country.  
Trucks carry goods on the highway,  
Trucks carry goods on the highway,  
Trucks carry goods on the highway,  
And bring them to our town.

### Word identification

My favorite way to teach word identification concepts through music is an adaptation of shared reading (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996). Shared singing is singing together as a class while following along with the lyrics printed on chartpaper or an overhead transparency ("big lyrics" instead of Big Books). Mooney's (1990) model of *to, with, and by* lends itself very well to shared singing. I begin by singing the song to the students or playing it on a tape or CD player. Much like the initial read-aloud in a shared reading lesson, this first singing familiarizes students with the song.

I then display the lyrics printed on chartpaper or an overhead and read them to the students, pointing to the words and explaining vocabulary and concepts as needed. I read the lyrics with the students, choral fashion, while pointing to the words. The students then read the lyrics back to me. The best follow-up activity is singing and enjoying the song together. Other activities can focus on print features such as spelling patterns and word parts.

Nursery rhymes printed on chartpaper also lend themselves very well to shared singing activities. Many nursery rhymes can be put to one or more of the

## Familiar tunes for songwriting activities

### Familiar tunes

Achy Breaky Heart  
Act Naturally  
Amazing Grace  
Army Life  
Ballad of Jed Clampett  
Camptown Races  
Davy Crockett  
Down in the Valley  
Ghost Riders in the Sky  
Gilligan's Island Theme  
Glory, Glory, Hallelujah  
Greensleeves  
Home on the Range  
Let My People Go  
Oh Where Has My Little Dog Gone  
Polly-Wolly Doodle  
Pop Goes the Weasel  
Red River Valley  
Rock Around the Clock  
Row, Row, Row Your Boat  
Sweet Betsy From Pike  
The Hokey Pokey  
The Rose  
This Old Man  
Three Blind Mice  
Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star  
Yankee Doodle  
Yellow Rose of Texas  
Yellow Submarine  
You Are My Sunshine  
Your Cheatin' Heart

### Repetitive songs

Are You Sleeping

A-Hunting We Will Go  
Buffalo Gals  
Crawdad Song  
Did You Ever See a Lassie  
Frère Jacques  
Go Tell Aunt Rhody  
Head, Shoulders, Knees, and Toes  
Here We Go Round the Mulberry Bush  
If You're Happy and You Know It  
It Ain't Gonna Rain No More  
Jimmy Crack Corn  
Lazy Mary Will You Get Up  
London Bridge  
Mama Don't Allow  
Mary Wore Her Red Dress  
99 Bottles of Beer on the Wall  
She'll Be Comin' Round the Mountain  
Shortnin' Bread  
Skip to My Lou  
The Ants Go Marching  
The Bear Went Over the Mountain  
The Other Day, I Met a Bear  
The Wheels on the Bus  
This Little Light of Mine  
This Old Man  
Three Blind Mice

### Cumulative songs

Green Grass Grew All Around  
Hush, Little Baby  
Old MacDonald  
There Was an Old Lady Who Swallowed a Fly

words that contained the /oi/ sound, discovered the two spelling patterns, and then sorted the words into columns. My students then went on a 2-day word hunt to find additional /oi/ words and add them to the list. Some of these included the following:

joy	oink
Troy	point
oyster	join
ahoy	asteroid
boysenberry	oil
noisy	boil

An important consideration when using songs and other forms of literature is to balance the teaching of print concepts against maintaining the literary integrity of the piece. Rosenblatt (1980) cautioned against analyzing the print and grammatical features of literary works because this may diminish the quality of students' esthetic experiences with these works. My personal experience with teaching literacy through singing is that using printed song lyrics to highlight common spelling patterns and word parts does not diminish students' enthusiasm for learning and singing the songs. Instead, focusing on some print features increases students' attention to the words and their ability to participate more fully in the enjoyment of the songs.

Throughout the school years, as our classroom collection of favorite songs has grown, I have typed and bound these songs in classroom song anthologies. I make multiple copies so that each student can keep one in his or her desk. These booklets are very handy for sing-alongs and are popular during sustained silent reading.

## Songwriting

Just as writing activities are a necessary companion to reading instruction, songwriting complements the joys and learning opportunities associated with singing. Helping students rewrite original lyrics to an existing song makes use of the song's text and melodic patterns to support students' songwriting efforts. Repetitive and cumulative songs (see song list in the Sidebar) provide extra support for initial songwriting in the same way that pattern and predictable books provide extra support for initial

tunes listed in the Sidebar. For example, the nursery rhyme *Three Little Kittens* can be sung very easily to the tunes of *Ghost Riders in the Sky*, *Home on the Range*, or *Your Cheatin' Heart*. *Mary Had a Little Lamb* can be sung to the tunes of *Greensleeves*, *The Rose*, or *Yankee Doodle*.

One of my favorite follow-up activities for shared reading and shared singing is to guide students to underline common spelling patterns and word parts on the chart paper or an overhead transparency (Pinnell & Fountas, 1998). For example, after singing *Grandma's Featherbed*, my students examined the

chartpaper lyrics and underlined words containing consonant blends (*floor*, *bread*, *bolt*, *spit*), digraphs (*shed*, *choice*, *featherbed*), and -ing (*sing*, *morning*, *fishing*).

Wagstaff (1994, 1998) describes an instructional procedure that uses rhyming words from poems to build word families using onsets and rimes (Adams, 1990). This procedure works well as a follow-up activity to shared singing. For example, after singing Tom Paxton's song *The Marvelous Toy* recently, my students pointed out that the first two rhyming words in the song are *boy* and *toy*. We then brainstormed

reading. For example, after singing *Put Your Finger in the Air*, my students and I brainstormed other places to put their fingers, generated rhyming words, and wrote verses about it. Here are some favorites:

Put your finger on your shoe, and then walk to the zoo.  
Put your finger on your food, and you'll be very rude.  
Put your finger on your teacher, and see if you can reach her.

While learning the Appalachian folk-song *Mama Don't Allow No Guitar Playing 'Round Here*, our class rewrote verses to create our own song *Teacher Don't Allow*. The first verse goes as follows:

Teacher don't allow no book readin' 'round here,  
Teacher don't allow no book readin' 'round here,  
Well we don't care what the teacher don't allow  
We'll read books anyhow,  
Teacher don't allow no book readin' 'round here.

Subsequent verses dealt similarly with other curriculum areas: story writin', number countin', and science learnin'. This song, like many others, was written on chartpaper and became part of our daily shared singing. Here is the last tongue-in-cheek verse:

Teacher don't allow no happy students 'round here,  
Teacher don't allow no happy students 'round here,  
Well we don't care what the teacher don't allow  
We'll be happy anyhow,  
Teacher don't allow no happy students 'round here.

### Active participation

In 1998 the International Reading Association and the National Association for the Education of Young Children released a joint position statement outlining principles and practices of appropriate education for young children, which pointed out that "high-quality book reading occurs when children feel emotionally secure and are active participants in reading" (pp. 198–199). Anyone who has appreciated the shining faces of children in song can testify that music provides emotional security and active participation. Singing and

songwriting activities can bring many additional opportunities for students to respond and participate during classroom literacy instruction. Former U.S. Supreme Court justice Oliver Wendell Holmes understood the importance of singing when he wrote the following:

Alas for those who never sing,  
but die with all their music in them.

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## A model for improving reading through music study in band and orchestra

Mike Pearce

Early in a recent school year, the principal of Prairie Middle School in suburban Denver, Colorado, USA, came to the teaching staff with a clear message: The school's academic test scores were improving, with the exception of reading scores. Teachers of all subjects, including electives, needed to devise strategies for improving student literacy.

While I readily embraced the directive for schoolwide emphasis on reading, I was very invested in continuing to produce the great bands and orchestras for which our school had come to be known. It was important for me to develop a plan for engaging students in reading improvement while also increasing their musical knowledge and preserving the school's tradition for award-winning music groups. When I discussed possible strategies with my band and orchestra students, there were nods of agreement when I stated that it would be hard to find satisfaction in a reading improvement plan if one of the