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# Words and Music: The Relationship Between Group Singing and Literacy Learning

by

**Brenda S. Engel, Nancy Langstaff, Mary B. Snow**

*“Language is essentially musical and rhythmic in nature.” (Don Holdaway, informal communication)*

*“Learning occurs when the learner engages with a demonstration so that it, in effect, becomes the learner’s demonstration.” (Frank Smith, Language Arts, January 1981, p. 108)*

*First grade class streams into room followed by teacher. Go to corner, sit down on rug. Quiet. Air of expectancy as music teacher puts words to song on easel in front of children. Large print. Randy, slumped against wall, legs crossed, arms hanging. Leans forward from hips without uncrossing legs as children, led by teacher, start to sing. R follows words on easel with eyes, mouth moving. Keeps time with whole body, swaying slightly, arms across stomach; then beats time gently with hands on floor. Teacher points to text with long wooden “pointer.” R intent on following. (observer notes)*

Our common awareness of how elementary school children can become involved “body and soul” in singing brought us, the three authors of this article, to ask ourselves the questions which led to this article: What significance can singing have for early literacy learning? What is the quality of an experience that brings about the kind of intense engagement and participation witnessed in the scene described above? What are the areas of commonality between singing and reading and how can the two activities support each other? Our search for answers to these questions involved observations of children singing interspersed with discussions among the three of us over a period of one academic year.

*Twelve children sitting on floor in semicircle. “I had a cat / the cat pleased me / I fed my cat under yonder tree. / The cat went ‘fiddle-i-fee.’ I had a hen ...” Little boy, arms akimbo, flapping. Group really with it ... Jimmy going to be a sheep now. Each child getting to be animal. One child starts clapping on knees ...” (observer notes)*

We concentrated on one first grade class in the belief that getting to know a particular group of children relatively well might lead us to deeper understanding and new insights. Among us we made eight planned, documented observations and a number of informal observations of the seventeen children in the class both during group singing and when they were engaged in other activities like reading, painting, and writing.

Children in the public elementary school first grade where we did our observations sang a great deal—in the classroom led by the teacher and in an activities room (“Literacy Center”) led by specialists. One way or another they sang daily. The classroom teacher was unusual in her comfort and assurance in “a cappella” singing, and the children were enthusiastic, unabashed participants. The words to the songs were ordinarily displayed in large print on an easel or projected onto a

screen. The children—most of them most of the time—followed the text with their eyes as they sang. Many of the songs were sung over and over, the tunes and words becoming familiar to the children; new selections were added frequently.

*Music teacher has words to song, "McTavish," on easel before groups of children sitting on floor:*

*"MacTavish is dead and his brother don't know it  
His brother is dead and MacTavish don't know it  
They're both of them dead and they're in the same bed  
And neither one knows that the other is dead."*

*Ricky, very eager, on knees, leaning forward to see words ... seems very keen, involved, attentive, trying to get all the words in, to keep up with the fast pace. (observer notes)*

During the group singing session, the children were temporarily bound together in a community through their coordinated physical response to rhythm, shared appreciation of the meaning of the words, and anticipation of patterns and repeats in both music and words. They seemed very much "with it"—with the words and music, with each other. The fact that learning was taking place was self-evident and learning the melody and reading the words was only the beginning; we were aware that the children were also developing understanding of literary and musical forms and conventions. They sang the text fairly much in time and reasonably faithfully to what was displayed on the easel. No extrinsic motivation was given (or evidently needed)—no competition, grades, or awards. The pleasure of group singing was its own reward.

Most of the songs the class sang were folk songs, rounds, seasonal songs or carols, and simple composed songs. Most had relatively simple musical structures, repeating patterns in both music and text. They were also characterized by spirit, humor, and a variety of cultural origin. The language was colorful, the vocabulary notably not that of the typical basal reader. To return to our initial question: How do words and music become unified as a genre? And what can singing add to literacy learning? Following are some of our thoughts, based on and illustrated by our observations:

Language brings with it discursive meaning, something like story, with which it enriches song. Music—melody, rhythm, dynamics—adds a different kind of meaning, eliciting from the listener or participant immediate feeling and physical response. For beginning readers, as teachers and parents know, decoding language in printed form can be laborious; the difficulties can endanger the children's grasp of, even belief in, the eventuality of finding personal meaning in text. As they lose the sense of the shape of sentences, paragraphs, or story because of the effort required along the way, they sometimes also lose confidence that the page holds a message of significance for them. For these reasons, until forward motion or reasonable fluency is established, children often fail to take pleasure in the activity of reading.

Since the individual's response to music is immediate, perhaps even "innate," music can provide a matrix or structure that holds meaning in view, keeping it in place as the text is being negotiated. Through its close association with melody and rhythm, the text assumes a shape even before the actual words are encountered; the singer/reader is thus able to anticipate meaning with confidence. Music gives the words forward motion; one might say the singers are carried along "on wings of song" and, for the moment at least, they have the experience of being fluent readers.

1. *"Goodnight Mr. Beetle*
2. *Goodnight Mr. Fly*
3. *Goodnight Mrs. Ladybug*
4. *The Moon's in the sky.*
5. *Goodnight Mr. Rooster*
6. *Goodnight Mrs. Sheep*
7. *Goodnight Mr. Horse*
8. *We must all go to sleep.*
9. *Goodnight Miss Kitten*
10. *Goodnight Mr. Pup*
11. *I'll see you in the morning*
12. *When the sun comes up."*

Even without the music, these verses are satisfying in some of the ways verse can be: rhythm and pattern leading to anticipation, regularity preparing the way for change or surprise—in this case, a kind of “expected surprise” since the pattern of rhymes at the ends of the lines already prepares the reader/singer for novelty.

The music enhances the text, heightening some shared qualities as well as adding new ones. The musical notes and time both repeat a pattern on lines 1, 2, and 3, vary it on line 4. Lines 4, 8, and 12 end with a harmonic resolution—dominant to tonic—that reflects the resolution of the rhyming words. The resolutions on lines 4 and 8 are pauses, the one on line 12, final, the end of the song. In this song, children experienced beginnings and endings, rhythm, sequence, pattern, variations on a theme and, if they were following the text, the common conventions of print.

No matter how often this song has been sung before, its qualities can be enjoyed over and over: humor, spirit, satisfying rhythms, tensions and resolutions. It never gets used up because it is *experienced*, not simply *taught*.

*Children enter room, congregate on rug in corner. With no introduction, music teacher starts singing, pointing to text on easel:*

*"Found a peanut  
Found a peanut  
Found a peanut last night  
Last night I found a peanut  
Found a peanut last night."*

*James: "That's 'Oh My Darling Clementine!'"  
Teacher: "That's right ... it's the same tune."*

*Continue singing verses, each of which introduces new event in the first line and changes word order around in second line:*

*"Cracked it open  
Cracked it open  
Cracked it open last night.  
Last night I cracked it open  
Cracked it open last night."*

*Song continues with variations in words on each line. Children, led by teacher, act out each newly introduced event, making appropriate gestures to go with words: "It was rotten ... ate it anyway ... got a stomach ache ... called the doctor ... penicillin ... operation ... died anyway ... went to heaven ... wouldn't take me ... went the other way ... didn't want me ... was a dream ... woke up ... found a peanut ... cracked it open ..., etc." (observer notes)*

They ended where they began, having demonstrated a convention: the end as the beginning. The melody, with its repetitions, echoed the idea of circularity. The song as a whole is also, of course, an irony: *not learning from experience.*

*Group of twelve children sitting on floor in front of teacher. Large song chart on wall with blank paper beside it. Teacher starts singing, pointing to each word with her finger. Children chime in, all eyes on song chart, reading the words as they sing. Apparently a song they know. The tune is very simple with repetitions based on a triad:*

*"Going on a picnic  
Leaving right away  
If it doesn't rain we'll stay all day.  
'Did you bring the hot dogs?'  
'Yes I brought the hot dogs.'  
Ready for the picnic? Here we go!"*

*After singing through, teacher solicits names of food to bring on the picnic. She writes suggestions on the blank sheet of paper with the initials of the volunteer after the food until every child has had a turn: "apples," "oranges," "hamburgers," etc.*

*The children are eager, focusing on the writing, clearly connecting their suggestions with the written words. The song is sung again with substitutions of foods. The child who suggests a food sings the response: 'Did you bring the apples?' (everyone) / 'Yes, I brought the apples.' (single child)*

*The next song was "Barnacle Bill," a counting song. Again a simple, repeating song (e.g., verse 5)*

*"When Barnacle Bill was five  
He learned to swim and dive.  
Bonnie over-in the clover  
Half past five."*

*The children focused particularly on the cue numbers on the chart, the teacher reinforcing cues by holding up the appropriate number of fingers. Children then made up their own rhymes, remembering the rhythms, stresses, number of syllables, tune. Then all repeated new verse by memory. One offering, for example: 'When Barnacle Bill was ten, he tried to catch a hen.' Other songs on charts around the room included Mother Goose rhymes, "Curly Locks," "The North Wind Doth Blow," "Rub-a-Dub-Dub," "Lucy Locket," "Who Built the Ark?" "There Were Ten in the Bed," "Soldier, Won't You Marry Me?" (observer notes)*

Many of the “kinds of knowledge” identified by contemporary theorists of literacy learning are evident in the above scene:

- Knowledge about spoken language: The song about the picnic is colloquial, the language patterns everyday and familiar.
- Knowledge about literacy language: “doth” in “The North Wind Doth Blow,” although not current usage, becomes part of a child’s understood vocabulary from the context of the song. “Doth” would never appear in a basal reader.
- Conventional organization of written language, pattern, and rhythm is vividly illustrated by the second song, “Barnacle Bill.” The counting and rhyming constitute a pattern which gives meaning to what would otherwise be meaningless.
- Conventions of print are demonstrated on the easel in letters large enough for all the children to read.
- The first song illustrates a common literary (and musical) convention: variations on a theme. Many other conventions, too, are evident in the songs cited in this observation (e.g., the academic question, “Who Built the Ark?” understood as a setup for a sequence of responses). “Soldier, Soldier,” a conventional dialogue form, is also an example of a story with a predictable surprise twist at the end.
- Finally, each of the songs evokes a cultural context—the world of the sea chantey, the English nursery, the Biblical world, etc.

The play between knowledge brought and knowledge gained is faster than the eye or ear can follow. All the kinds of knowledge cited above are virtually taken in and exercised at the same moment. Little needs to be made explicit. The singer understands the character and cultural context of Barnacle Bill, the meaning of “doth,” the rationale for “Bonnie Over ... in the Clover” as he/she is making use of that understanding. Knowledge is not *prerequisite* to performance as it is, for instance, in learning to read by phonics. Here, discursive meaning and experiential meaning have become one: singing is quite literally “the learner’s demonstration.”

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\* List of References is incomplete. The authors were unable to attribute certain songs to a specific source. The songs have become part of an oral tradition.