

# LET'S BRING BACK THE MAGIC OF SONG FOR TEACHING READING

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In most primary classrooms in the United States, reading instruction is increasingly dominated by literature (chiefly stories) and informational texts. Recent calls for reading curriculum reform continue to note the primacy of literature and informational texts (Dorfman & Capelli, 2007; Flowers & Flowers, 2009; Spencer, 2011).

Yet a considerable amount of language activity we engage in as adults involves rhythmical words such as songs. Perhaps it is singing in places of worship, or the beginning of a sporting event, or singing along to the radio while driving, or just listening to one's ipod while walking in the neighborhood. If during these singing episodes we were provided with the written lyrics to the songs, we would be reading!

We think that singing (while simultaneously having a visual display of the words in the songs) could be a very useful instructional tool to teach

reading to beginning readers. A growing body of research and scholarly thought suggests that singing has potential for improving reading (Biggs, Homan, Dedrick, & Rasinski, 2008; Fisher, 2001; Harp, 1988; Hines, 2010; Miller & Coen, 1994; Smith, 2000). For example, Biggs and colleagues (2008) found that the regular repeated singing and reading of songs by struggling middle school readers over a nine-week

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period resulted in significantly greater progress in reading achievement (seven months gain on average) than a comparison group of students in an alternative intervention.

When students sing while tracking the lyrics to songs, they are in essence reading. Singing increases time spent reading. Scholarly thought in literacy suggests that the more reading young readers do, the better readers they will become (Allington, 2002; Morgan, Mraz, Padak, & Rasinski, 2008). The joyfulness embedded in singing may motivate students to want to sing (and read) even more.

Certain features are embedded in songs that make them memorable and enjoyable. First, the melody and rhythm of songs makes them easy to learn and easy to remember. One of our goals for beginning readers is to develop a robust sight vocabulary. Sight words are essentially memorized words—by sight and sound. The memorability of the words in songs offers good opportunities for developing young students' sight vocabulary.

Song lyrics (a form of poetry) often are embedded with rhyme, assonance, and alliteration. This playing with the sounds of language through song can be a gateway to the development of phonemic awareness. The rhyming nature of most song lyrics also provides teachers with excellent texts for teaching word families (rimes). When we work on the “-ob” word family, we are sure to teach students “When the red red robin comes bob, bob, bobbing along.”

Songs lend themselves to repeated reading, a research-tested method for developing reading fluency (Samuels, 1979; Therrian, 2004). How many of us hear a song in the morning and find ourselves singing it all day long? The repetitious nature of singing (choruses are sung repeatedly in a song) provide opportunities for improving students' reading fluency. Moreover, the melodic nature of songs requires the singer/reader to attend to the prosodic nature of the lyric. Prosody is often the part of reading fluency that is ignored (Dowhower, 1994).

Finally, songs are “a natural way to get children to pay attention to rhymes and a fun way to learn” (Temple, Ogle, Crawford, & Freppon, 2010, p. 116). In essence, the brevity, melody, rhythm, and other features of songs and song lyrics make them easy to learn. Many first graders encounter frustration when they are unable to fluently read lengthy texts. The ability to sing and read a song lyric is an accomplishment that could improve young, struggling readers' confidence in their ability to read.

### **A Year of Singing**

In the 2011–2012 school year, Becky (first author) decided to bring song back

into her first-grade classroom by teaching her students one or two new songs each week. As students sang throughout each week she reminded them to track the words—to read as they sing. Eighteen of Becky's students began and ended the year with her and were assessed using the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA; Beaver, 2012) in September and May. Results of the DRA suggest that all but one of her students made at least a year's growth in reading, and several students exhibited greater than average reading growth.

We acknowledge that we cannot attribute Becky's success solely to the fact that students sang regularly in her class. In classroom-based research, because students receive a variety of forms of instruction, it is nearly impossible to specify an exact cause to any one instructional approach. Yet Becky's results appear to be in line with other scholarship (noted earlier) that supports singing in the classroom.

Reading rhythmical language in the primary grades is not new. Teachers have been singing with students since the days of the McGuffey Reader. However, the recent emphasis on narrative and informational reading has led to a decline in this type of reading (Gill, 2007). Sometimes, perhaps, to go forward in reading instruction, we need to take a look backward at where we have been.

### **Becky's Singing Classroom**

Each week Becky taught her students one or more songs, mostly children's songs. Deciding factors for Becky's song

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selections included those with distinct melodies, simple and regular rhythm, and lyrics that easily fit the melody and rhythm structure and could easily be learned and sung by children. Of course, Becky chose songs that had content that was appropriate for primary-grade students. Becky found most of her songs online and on CD collections of songs for children. Samples of songs she taught her first graders included “You Are My Sunshine,” “Yankee Doodle,” “Miss Mary Mack,” “This Little Light of Mine,” “Take Me Out to the Ballgame,” “Red Red Robin,” “We Shall Overcome,” and “A Tisket, A Tasket.”

Although Becky attempted to choose songs that tied into a particular curriculum theme or time of year (holiday songs in December; “Take Me Out to the Ballgame” at the beginning of baseball season), most often she chose songs that she felt children would enjoy singing. Several websites (e.g., [www.theteachersguide.com/ChildrensSongs.htm](http://www.theteachersguide.com/ChildrensSongs.htm)) provided Becky with a compendium of songs for children as well as ideas for connecting songs to curricular themes.

Here’s a typical weekly routine Becky used for teaching “You Are My Sunshine” to her students. Becky spends approximately 10–15 minutes each day on singing with her students.

### Day 1

- “You Are My Sunshine” is playing as students arrive to acquaint students with the melody and words. Some students call out, “I know this song!” While students listen to the song played several times, the lyrics are charted in front of them. As Becky and her class sing the song several times throughout the day, often during transition times, Becky points to the words in the charted lyrics to draw

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students’ attention to the written words.

- Becky leads her class in a discussion talk about what the song means: “What is this song teaching us?” Some students think it teaches us about sunshine. Some note that it’s about love. Becky asks, “Who do you think the sunshine is in this song?” One student notes that it is about a person singing to someone he or she is in love with. Becky asks students to think of other words they know that might refer to love besides *sunshine*. Students respond with *honey, dear, cutie, baby, and sweetie*. Becky writes these on a chart entitled “Words of Love.”
  - Next Becky directs students to find words they know in the lyrics. Many are already displayed on the word wall: *you, are, my, some, know, happy, make, take*.
  - Each student receives a personal copy of the song and illustrates it. In the following days, Becky will ask students to read the words from their own copies as they sing. Students take home their copy of the song and sing it to and with their parents several more times.
- the previous day and offer personal comments such as, “I love this song,” or “My mom sang this to me last night.” Becky asks how many students sang the song the previous night at home. All hands go up!
- Becky and her students sing the song chorally from the chart and from their own personal copies. Becky reminds students to look at the words on the chart as they are sung. She or a student points to the words as the class sings.
  - Becky asks her students to call out more words from the song that they recognize. Any new words that students recognize, such as *sunshine* and *gray*, are added to the word wall.
  - Many teachable moments arise from the discussion of the words. Becky notes the compound nature of *sunshine*. She also points out to students rhyming words, words that begin or end with a particular letter or sound. And she shows students how the “-ay” word family in *gray* appears in other words such as *day, say, stay, may, and bay*.
  - The brief discussion is followed by students singing the song again in varied forms—boys only, girls only, slowly, quickly, and so forth. Again, Becky asks students to share what they think the song might be about. One child notes that it may be about a mom singing about her child. At various times during the

### Day 2

- “You Are My Sunshine” is playing as students arrive. The song lyrics are still on display, and many students gravitate toward them. Most students recall the song from

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day Becky leads her students in a rendition of the song.

### Day 3

- Students enter the classroom in the morning with the song playing. Many children sing along as they hang up their coats and ready themselves for the day.
- Becky begins the day by asking students to sing along with her.
- Next she draws students' attention to particular words such as *sun* from *sunshine*. She asks students to think of other words that rhyme with *sun* and contain the "-un" word family. Students call out *fun*, *bun*, *run*, and Becky displays the words on the dry-erase board.
- Becky asks students to work in small groups and think of words that contain the "-ake" word family and other words besides *gray* that begin with *gr-*. After a few minutes of work, students call out their responses, and Becky charts the words on the dry-erase board.
- Students chorally read the words they have brainstormed and end with one or more renditions of the song.

### Day 4

- As in previous days, the day begins with students and Becky singing their song together. Students sing as a whole group and in smaller groups.
- Becky asks students to share their favorite parts of the song and to

read the lines (or words) they love most. She asks students to explain their choices.

- The song is sung throughout the day.
- At the end the day, Becky asks students to write in their journals their feelings about learning "You Are My Sunshine."

### Day 5

- The school day begins with one or two renditions of "You Are My Sunshine." By now nearly all students are able to sing the song, read the song fluently without the melody, identify words from the song in isolation, and identify related rhyming words.
- The principal, always an appreciative audience, is invited to the classroom to hear the class sing and read.
- Later that morning, students sing to one or more kindergarten classes. Throughout all the singing, students have visual access to the lyrics, either through the charted lyrics or students' own copies of the lyrics. Becky regularly reminds students to "look at the words as you sing," even though many students are quite proud at having memorized the lyrics.

Each week a new song (or songs) was taught and rehearsed in a similar manner. As songs were mastered, they are added to students' song and poetry binders, and as her class's repertoire of

songs increased, her class frequently reprised songs previously learned. One way to make the singing experience authentic and motivating was to provide a listening audience. Becky's class often took its "show" on the road by visiting and performing for other classes and inviting parents, principal, and other school staff to visit her class for a performance. During monthly school literacy celebrations, Becky's students were often asked to perform songs from their repertoire to parents and other audiences.

Because of the motivational nature of singing, students were willing to engage in repeated reading of the songs throughout the week until all students could read/sing the song fluently. Although the students in her class reflect a range of differences in reading achievement, the repeated readings allowed even the less proficient readers to develop a mastery of the songs that was equal to the more advanced students. Singing allowed all students to participate at a proficient level.

Word study was a big part of the song instruction. Becky often chose words for further study and display on the classroom word wall that were exemplars of word families and other phonics elements the class was studying, high-frequency words that she felt students should learn to recognize automatically, or words that she and her students felt were interesting or unusual and worth exploring in greater detail.

### Your Turn

If Becky can bring singing back into her classroom, you can too. The beauty of singing in the classroom is its simplicity and joyfulness. Songs are everywhere. We hope that Becky's story will inspire you to bring more singing into your own classroom. Teach your children a

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new song every week. Be sure to have the written lyrics available for students to read. Sing the same song repeatedly (repeated reading) until they are able to sing the song fluently. Then have your students perform for an audience. What could be better—children having fun singing while learning to read at the same time!

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## MORE TO EXPLORE

### Websites for Finding Folksongs and Songs for Children

- [www.theteachersguide.com/ChildrensSongs.htm](http://www.theteachersguide.com/ChildrensSongs.htm)
- [www.niehs.nih.gov/kids/music.htm](http://www.niehs.nih.gov/kids/music.htm)
- [www.songsforteaching.com](http://www.songsforteaching.com)
- [www.contemplator.com/america/](http://www.contemplator.com/america/)
- [www.scoutsongs.com/categories/patriotic.html](http://www.scoutsongs.com/categories/patriotic.html)