

The Role of Songs in Enhancing Literacy

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Abstract

In education, reading and writing skills are important for children to learn. Students in Nunavut are required to be bilingual and must be fluent in both English and Inuktitut in order to graduate from high school. The purpose of this research project is to explore the idea of how music can improve or enhance literacy skills.

Participants in this research consist of nineteen grade three students in the Rachel Arngnamaktiq Elementary School in Baker Lake, Nunavut. I gathered Inuktitut children's songs and CDs to use music in the classroom for a period of four weeks. The oral aspects of language were most impacted which supported the initial project hypothesis that oral skills as the building blocks of literacy can be strengthened with music, which leads to improved reading and writing skills.

My research supports the idea that listening, speaking, reading, and writing can be enhanced with singing during language arts instruction as a part of the curriculum. Singing songs, especially those with actions, can be fun for elementary school-aged children who learn best through play. Oral skills can become strengthened and can begin to make development of reading and writing easier as children advance into the higher grades. Using music during language arts class could help increase reading and writing skills, which are essential to all subject areas.

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Introduction

Children's abilities to read and write are an important part of their education and, in fact, their lives. Reading is a skill children will need not only for their schooling, but also throughout their lives. The purpose of this qualitative research study is to explore the idea of developing a music program in elementary school to help children pick up or increase their reading and writing skills. Would incorporating a music program in collaboration with the school curriculum help make learning to read and write easier for children? If using a music program early in school can help a child to learn and understand the rules of reading and writing can these skills stay with a child through to high school and beyond? There may not be an easy way to find this out. Researching this could take many years to determine.

This research project took place in Baker Lake, Nunavut, at Rachel Arngnamaktiq Elementary School. Baker Lake is an Inuit community with one elementary school consisting of Kindergarten to grade five classes. Each grade has at least two classes each; grade one and grade four have three classes in the 2012-2013 current school year. Beginning last school year, I am now teaching full time Inuktitut to two grade three classes. My homeroom grade three students learn Inuktitut in my class half of everyday and learn English the other half, with a unilingual English speaking teacher in the other grade three classroom. While my homeroom class learns English, I teach this other teacher's homeroom class Inuktitut.

Participants in this research consisted of my homeroom grade three class. Permission for the research was granted by the District Education Authority (DEA), principal, and parents of my grade three class, along with ethics approval from the UPEI Research Ethics Board. They were all informed in a letter that I would be using songs, rhymes, rhythm and movement, poems, and chants with the grade three homeroom class to see if and how using music would help children

learn oral, reading, and writing skills in Inuktitut. I developed a teaching process that I used to expose the students to various aspects of music and oral language that engaged the students and exposed them to language in a different medium. In addition to this, once the process started, I kept detailed notes of what I was planning to do along with reflections on how the lessons went with the children, adapting these to maximize the students' involvement in the activities.

My homeroom class learned songs from Inuktitut music by popular singers and groups in the North, as well as popular children's songs, which were written on chart paper. I observed the children's attitudes and interest on top of oral, reading, written, and comprehension skills in my homeroom. I noted the visible enjoyment and participation of the students in the singing activities. I wrote reflective journal notes and then wrote up a final report. This report was distributed to the DEA, principal, and parents to show results of the research.

Critical Discussion

“Literacy”

The beginning developing literacy skills is very important to me as a teacher. Any skill students pick up, especially in primary school, can be enriched once developed and that will help make advanced learning easier for students as they move along in school. The literacy skills students learn in primary school through the use of music, along with the curriculum, can give students an excellent starting point for learning to read and write. Dyer (2010) quotes D. G. Wiggins by stating that “a beginning knowledge of children's songs, chants, hand claps, singing games, and dances is essential to begin integrating music into literacy experiences” (p. 6).

I find that when we did sing songs in class the students became more engaged in any activity we did for the rest of the day. They seemed to be paying more attention and answered questions more readily during a lesson. The students also worked a little harder during seatwork,

as well, and were seemingly more alert or active and started to predict what I might say next or where the discussion was going to go. Bill Harp “believes that music complements reading instruction because language, especially that of children, has rhythm and melody” (as cited in Fisher, 2001, p. 40). Robert McCracken and Marlene McCracken “maintain that poetry, songs, and stories are central to quality literacy instruction” (as cited in Fisher, 2001, p. 40).

The very first song we sang during my research in the classroom was an easy song they had learned before. It is called “*Niaquinnaq*” and the students squat down holding a partner’s hand and sing while they ‘bop’ up and down, bounce, to the song. Dyer (2010) says, “By integrating music into early elementary literacy instruction, teachers can enhance engagement, memory, recall, and phonemic awareness” (p. 9). The children picked up on the song quickly because it is short and can be sung over and over; they can sing it once, then get a different partner and sing again.

Songs also can give children the correct pronunciation of a word. By not guessing the word each time, they can become more confident in themselves and more willing to sound out or spell words. I once taught a grade one class where my students learned to sing a song in Inuktitut; they got to know the pattern of a sequence of counting or the days of the week, for example. Once they learned how to sing the Inuktitut version of the five little ducks, the students knew Inuktitut numbers one to five and were able to quickly rote count. They were better able to learn more quickly the long Inuktitut numbers six to ten because they now definitely knew one to five. They also learned the Inuktitut version of “There Are Seven Days” and were able to put the days of the week in correct order, as well as remember what they are called in Inuktitut.

Fisher (2001) conducted a research study with four Spanish classes in which two classes used music in their classrooms and two did not. The study took two years to complete in

kindergarten and grade one classes, and three types of tests were used to come to a conclusion.

“It is clear that the students in the two classes that used music as part of their language arts curriculum outperformed students in the two classes that did not” (p. 43).

As we went along in our four short weeks of singing songs in our classroom, the students were starting to ask what song we are going to learn next or if it’s going to be a dance. Once I hung the chart to introduce them to the next song, and I started giving them a few seconds to read the title or song before I told them what it was. Each time, the fluent reader quickly read aloud the title and never gave the others a chance to read for themselves, so I told her to read it quietly to herself. Some of the other students were able to read slowly the title toward the end of the four weeks.

Music can also make school a more cheerful place to come to and can possibly make managing a class more efficient. Paquette and Rieg (2008) suggest that “music can transform classrooms into positive learning environments where children thrive academically, socially and emotionally” (p. 227). If there were to be a music program in the school involving all classes, perhaps it could also make the whole school positive and fun for all children.

Trinick (2012) feels the same: “For children, singing is a form of personal and cultural expression, evoking emotional responses, telling stories, and creating a sense of belonging and well-being” (p. 5). Singing songs and using instruments can sometimes be perceived as play for children, and play is very important to them. Having fun while learning can possibly strengthen the skills taught to children. When children are having fun, it seems they are better able to remember what they have learned. They also seem to be more engaged in the activity taking place at the moment.

“Play and Movement”

Many Inuit children have had the opportunity in their families to just play, as I had while growing up. Their parents typically allow children to make tools to play with so they will practice skills they may need to be proficient in once they are grown up. They teach games and sometimes parents play with their children to make it more fun. Play is often used as a learning strategy. As McIntire (2007) put it, “Literacy is naturally developed through music. Beginning with Jean Piaget in the 1920s, researchers have demonstrated that young children learn best through play in an emotionally risk-free environment” (p. 44). Learning songs and singing together can create that risk-free environment. Students might find something they have in common with others and that can connect them to each other. That might help students become more comfortable with each other and make friends more easily. It can also make learning to read and write a little more enjoyable. I do not think time to play in school should be as open as it sometimes is at home, but music in school can be as fun as play. Teachers can definitely use music in their classrooms, as I sometimes do, to aid in teaching literacy, making it almost seem like play.

Increasing engagement, memory and enhancing phonemic awareness seem to work together to help develop literacy, and they can be enhanced and increased through music. Dyer’s (2010) article also describes how music can enhance literacy instruction stating, “In other words, music gives students the opportunity to read, write, speak, sing, dance, and play with literacy” (p. 9). There was one year where all the students in our school were playing some clapping/singing game all the time; something about “taking a long time to cook, tsk, tsk,” called “Downtown Baby.” That was so easy for children to pick up and learn the song. It was quite popular, and they were singing/clapping with each other a lot. Adding claps to songs like those help their memory and sometimes phonemic awareness, as well. If it was written on paper for students to read, it

might help them pick up some reading strategies to use, such as patterns. This implies that knowing and understanding reading and writing skills can start at a very young age and can help develop literacy. As children at a very young age learn songs, chants, claps, games, and dances, they are already leading up to learning literacy skills.

Children's oral language development and knowledge can be expanded through the use of stories, as well as movement. I often use stories in my lesson plans to expand thought and imagination. Many of the songs we sang during my research in the classroom had some kind of movement to them. Some of them had repetition in the songs and some told stories. Although some of songs seemed a little hard for a few students to learn, they liked learning the movements and dances to those songs. Once the students learned a new dance or move to a particular song, they were better able to remember how to sing the song. All six of the songs the class chose to sing to their parents for literacy day had movement except two. They didn't need a lot of time to practice to get to know most of those songs by heart.

As the research proceeded, the students were beginning to look forward to learning new songs each day. They had fun learning new songs, especially those with movement. Enjoyable experiences can become memorable for people of any age. Children learn very quickly and with the use of music, skills can be further developed and strengthened, especially for primary aged students who love to play.

As I said before, the students really enjoyed learning songs that have movement. One particular song they enjoyed was not really a dance but was like a touch movement. They touch their feet and head in particular order, starting off slow, then get faster as the song is sung faster, following the beat of the song. Some of those who were shy or hesitant to try the dance quickly picked up the pattern of the movement of the dance and later became a little more willing to try

another dance. The ones who were not yet ready to try this dance were able to clap along to the song and follow the beat as well. Although song and dance may not be considered play, the children certainly had fun singing and dancing. I believe that if children have the opportunity for play, their imaginations could expand and grow.

“Speaking”

Since I started my teaching career, I have thought about some things that might help make teaching reading and writing somewhat easier for students to learn. This includes music, as I have always thought it would enhance language learning. I had thought that learning songs would increase vocabulary and help develop speaking which can extend to reading and writing ability. I am not alone in this belief. Susannah Lamb and Andrew Gregory wrote that “children achieving high scores on pitch discrimination also did well on phonic awareness and showed good reading performance” (as cited in McIntire, 2007, p. 44). While children learn the words to children’s songs, they are learning other aspects related to language. But it not only does that for children, it could be a way of enhancing what they learn as they sing songs or listen to music.

Singing songs on a regular basis in language class may allow those skills learned related to language to be enriched as they progress in their education. According to Moore “Regular use of music experiences such as singing in the classroom has benefits for both language development as well as music development” (as cited in Trinick, 2011, p.6). Trinick continues that this “should be viewed as a partnership that may enrich the learning process, with a purposeful methodology for both” (2011, p. 6). Music does not only have to be for enjoyment; it can also be a teaching tool.

From the first day children enter school, they are taught songs including the Inuktitut songs $\Delta \wedge \cap \rho$ (an Inuktitut version of the ABC song), which helps them learn the symbols of the

syllabarium. They also learn other songs, learning about numbers and counting, including $C^cL^c\Gamma\Omega\zeta^c$ (“the five little ducks”). This year in grade three, I am using the syllabarium with my students to spell words. If they are not able to find a certain symbol they need to use, they sing the $\Delta\Lambda\Omega\rho$ song, going down the list. Then, they are able to find the symbol themselves. It takes a lot of practice, but a couple of boys in particular have been using that song, still to this day, to find what they are looking for. These two particular boys are in a small group that gets a little extra help from the Student Support Assistant (SSA). The same could be said about rote counting and counting higher numbers for the song $C^cL^c\Gamma\Omega\zeta^c$ and a few other songs they learned already. As children sing, they can be learning vocabulary, sentence patterns, grammar, and spelling.

During and after the second week of the research, I noticed that the students were listening more closely to discussions we were having. They seemed to be more engaged in any activity going on in the classroom. They listened to what I was saying and had more things to say about the topic being discussed, whether it was a story or a lesson being taught during Inuktitut Language Arts, Social Studies and Health.

“Talking”

Music can have many different effects for people of all ages. Personally, it helps me connect with people. It allows me to feel like there are people who have the same emotions, experiences, ideas and many more. In Fisher’s (2001) research study of the four Spanish classes in which two classes used music in their classrooms and two did not,

The two classes in which music was used consistently had a low buzz of student talk, general excitement about humming along as they worked. The two classrooms in which

music was not part of the instruction were consistently more quiet and reserved. Students worked in groups, but talked softly. (p. 47)

I found that after my four weeks of research in my classroom, the students seem to be a lot more talkative. They were telling stories to each other about what they had done before which leads to more and more stories related from one student to another. They were friendlier with each other and told a lot of jokes. The quote above suggests that possibly even children could feel somewhat the same way I do about music.

My students are telling a lot of stories to each other being reminded of ‘a time when...’ during our lessons. Someone tells a little story, and they are reminded of another time or another incident and on and on it can go. If I would let them, they could talk all day. I find that if children are having fun, they generally are not as shy or more confident in speaking up. Dyer (2010) states, “Musical activities within a literacy program can (1) increase engagement, (2) help with memory, and (3) enhance phonemic awareness” (p. 4). Speaking more allows for practice in the language, which, in my opinion, helps keep students more engaged in the activities or lessons being taught.

Once the students get to know a story, I use questions to go deeper into the story and use that as a way to learn about writing. Some of the Inuktitut songs we sing now in grade three, have verses that tell a story. Once they get to know the story that turns into their own storytelling of ‘the time when...,’ and the students usually do listen more attentively to an actual story book we read chorally during language arts.

“Memory”

Music instruction could help make learning to read and write easier for students. There are a number of songs taught in the primary level to teach speaking, like $\Delta \wedge \cap \rho$ and $C^c C^c L^c$

ᐅᐅᐅᐅ, as I have mentioned before. Learning to speak as the beginning process of literacy instruction leading to reading and writing is the purpose of a lot of singing in primary schooling. Dyer (2010) notes that her research “shows that incorporating music into the classroom enhances elementary students’ engagement, memory, and recall during literacy instruction” (p. 3). When I taught grade one, I did use songs a lot, as well as repeating sight words they need to learn in my language arts instruction, which did help my students memory and/or recall.

Research Results

Reflective Journal Writing, Week 1, January 14-18

At the start of my research in the classroom, we started off singing one song a day, and we sang familiar songs to the students. There was one school closure that week due to weather, and the other four days we had low attendance throughout the whole school due to extreme cold weather. On the last day of the week, there were only seven present. The first few songs we sang were familiar songs to the students, and the class didn’t seem too interested except for at least four or five of them. I think most of the students were more into the action part of the singing, the moving around to the action songs. Most of the students were just sitting there, looking around the classroom, fiddling with their fingers or trying to rummage through the reading books.

I was wishing to have started this at the beginning of the year because the students know me so well now and know how I do things in the classroom; they know what I expect, so this first week they were simply doing what was expected, sitting still and not talking mostly. Then I decided to take out all the English books we borrow from the library, taking them next door to the other grade three classroom, where they can still have a chance to read them in the afternoons. I brought in a lot of new Inuktitut books that the school received before and that

seemed to interest the students. I am not sure what had prompted me to make this decision; perhaps I was trying to make our classroom a “full” Inuktitut classroom. They enjoyed those new books, although they still have to be changed into Baker Lake dialect.

On Monday, we sang $\sigma\text{ᐱ}^{\text{ᐱ}}\text{ᐱ}^{\text{ᐱ}}\text{ᐱ}^{\text{ᐱ}}$, an Inuktitut song where children squat and hold hands with a partner, then as they sing they bob up and down. We also had silent reading of the Inuktitut reader book that we had already read at the beginning of the year. On Tuesday, we sang $\Delta^{\text{ᐱ}}\text{ᐱ}^{\text{ᐱ}}$, an Inuktitut song, and had journal writing. The school was closed on Wednesday due to weather. On Friday, we sang $\Delta\text{ᐱ}\text{ᐱ}\text{ᐱ}$ (Inuktitut version of ABCs) and $C^{\text{ᐱ}}\text{ᐱ}^{\text{ᐱ}}\text{ᐱ}^{\text{ᐱ}}\text{ᐱ}^{\text{ᐱ}}$ (Five little ducks), then we were invited next door to the other grade three class because there were so few students in school that morning.

Reflective Journal Writing, Week 2, January 21-25

During the second week, the students are more attentive as we try to make sense of what the song means. This week we try to understand the story in the song. They are beginning to sing even when it is not singing time, while they are working at their seats, not singing time. They sing songs they had learned in other grades as well as the two Christmas songs they sang last. Making sense of the story in the songs we are singing leads to story telling of their past experiences. We sang about hunting and they had a lot of stories to tell about the time they went out on the land. The thing is they are speaking all in English and only use Inuktitut when they mention animals. In this week, the student who seems to be in “her own little world,” who hardly ever speaks to anybody, even in English, is showing some interest in the songs we have been singing. She tries to read the chart papers and asks the fluent reader in class to remind her of what the song is. They sing a couple of the songs written on the chart before they go back to their seats. This quiet student begins to take part in some of the action part of the singing; usually she

Reflective Journal Writing, Week Three, January 28-February 1

On Monday, we sang $\Delta^b <^b i \sigma \triangleright \rho^a \iota$ (from yesterday) and $\triangleright \wedge^a \iota \Gamma$ (“In the springtime”) by Charlie Panigoniak. We discussed what the students thought these songs were about. The discussion turned into storytelling about “when we were at the land” and almost each student spoke. We sang the first song, since we already knew how to sing it. Then we learned how to sing and listened to the second song on CD by Charlie Panigoniak. There were a couple of smiles when they heard the second verse; they understood what was said about one of the people out picking eggs and fell on his face who got his face full of eggs. Once we sang both above songs, someone asked to sing more songs and do a dance that we had already learned. On Tuesday, we sang $\triangleleft^a \cup \cap$ “*anguti*” an Inuktitut movement song by Nunavut Sivuniksavut group from YouTube. At first we watched the video and learned that there was a dance to this song. Once we caught on how to dance, I put the song on, and they tried the dance. There were a couple not willing to dance. Those not dancing, I encouraged to clap along, and they did. We never learned the song, just the dance.

I noticed that one of the girls, who does not particularly like to dance, was taking part and trying it out. She was even practicing the dance outside at recess; luckily, I was on duty and saw it. She was even talking to me outside when normally she hardly ever speaks to me at all. This girl is usually a really quiet student in class, hardly ever speaking to me about anything. Once she started dancing with the class to this particular song “*Anguti*” she was telling me about her siblings and what they did the day before, how one of them made her laugh. She was smiling and laughing as she told me about her little sister, happy to talk about her with me. This was the first time she ever spoke to me in school about her family. She does listen during lessons and tries to

any other time in the seven months since school started. She began taking interest in other movement songs or dances and even said at one time that she wants to dance but doesn't know how. As the days and weeks went by, she would try to dance and started becoming more and more confident as she got better in that dance that she first enjoyed.

The students have had fun with the singing and dancing in the short research project and perhaps started paying more attention, as well as becoming more engaged in activities. On top of the curriculum, music can be beneficial to their language skills on a whole. Listening, speaking, reading, and writing work together, and as these students listened to and learned to sing songs, these skills seemed to have become easier for them to use. With continued practice, these skills could possibly grow and enhance early on in their education.

In the short four weeks of the research, I cannot say for certain that music has helped make reading and writing easier for my students. I had thought that it would improve their oral skills, which I believe it has, and that it is the building block to reading and writing skills. If the singing and dancing had gone on longer, or if there were more time in the curriculum for music, I believe that these students' oral skills can become stronger and begin to make development of reading and writing easier as they advance into the higher grades. But, I think we would need to continue to use music with these children through the grades to say that music does help their reading and writing develop and improve.

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