

A Kindergarten Teacher's Reflections on the Power of Song in Teaching Early Reading

Recently, I have been interested in understanding the Science of Reading and naturally came across "The Science of Reading Podcast." I must admit that I almost skipped Season 1 Episode 4 The Importance of Fluency Instruction, thinking that it was not very relevant to my work in kindergarten. I am so happy that I did not skip that episode! Dr. Tim Rasinski's passionate argument that "fluency should be hot" hooked me. He explained how fluency is the bridge between decoding and comprehension. Our automaticity in word recognition and our expression in oral reading leads to and is reflective of comprehension. As teachers we can read books upside-down and still read with appropriate feeling and voice to make stories come alive because we have a strong bridge between our phonetic abilities and comprehension; that bridge of course is fluency.

In my kindergarten classroom, it turns out I do work on fluency more than I realized. Songs and poems are a key component of my reading instruction. Every morning we begin with a "morning dance party." This is a wonderful way to start any day for many reasons, but it is actually important to my instruction as well. I choose songs that reflect the content we are learning and we stick with that song for at least one whole week. I transcribe the lyrics of the song and project it onto the smart board. We read it together daily for a week or longer with less and less support from me. Eventually, I will have students point to the words and read independently. The final piece is that these songs make their way into our poetry center where students work more with familiar songs and poems in small groups and independently. They are expected to put the poems and songs in order using sentence strips. As the year goes on the strips get smaller and smaller, until they need to build the poems word by word.

Listening to Dr. Rasinski led me to reflect on my own reading experience. I love to read, but why? I began to think back to my own experience.

My whole life I wanted to be a singer. In first grade I would bring my portable cassette player and microphone to school and my lovely first grade teacher would indulge me as I performed for my class for show and tell. As a budding musician, I was highly motivated to learn the lyrics to the songs that I sang. I adored Mariah Carey's music, but I especially appreciated that she wrote all of her own songs

and always included her lyrics inside her tapes and CDs. I would listen over and over while following along with the lyrics (repeated reading). At that point I must have been able to decode, but I do believe that what I was doing was helping me improve my fluency.

I also remember that whenever a singer's or a musician's lyrics were not included in their album I would painstakingly listen to a few bars, pause, write down what I remembered, and then start again until the whole song was transcribed. If I had grown up in the time of lyrics.com, I wonder whether I ever would have become such a strong reader and writer!

Back in first grade, my lovely teacher invited me to her home to sing for some of her friends from Broadway. Alas, they were not impressed enough to offer me any roles and so ended my singing career. But I was not disheartened. I shifted focus that year to become just like my first grade teacher. So, in actuality, most of my life I wanted to become a teacher. My current role as a kindergarten teacher may just be the epitome of both my childhood ambitions – teacher scientist and artist. Teaching is indeed a performance and I spend my days singing and teaching budding readers! What could be better than that!

Thank you, Dr. Rasinski, for helping me recognize how the power of music in my classroom is actually an important part of the science and art of teaching reading.

Brienne Stevenson

Brienne can be reached at bas57@live.com