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Reading Readiness at the K-1 Level:  
Do Song Lyrics Aid in Word or Letter Recognition?

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## Reading Readiness at the K-1 Level:

### Do Song Lyrics Aid in Word or Letter Recognition?

Music is an integral part of life. It is performed, appreciated, experienced, and interacted with during a large majority of life experiences. This is especially true with children. From an early age, children express contentment through song. Their exposure to music comes from a variety of sources: in the home, in the grocery store, while eating at the restaurant, at places of recreation or entertainment, in church, in the family car, and at school or day care. Children make music their own by mimicking music sung by performers, parents, or teachers. Children exposed to music have the capacity to memorize the lyrics to a countless number of songs at young ages.

A study was done to show the effects of music on children in kindergarten and first grade while they learned words and letter recognition. The purpose of this study was to allow children to experience song lyrics and jingles in order to make learning to read more enjoyable. **This area of focus was chosen because almost all children seem to love music and respond to it in positive ways (Kouri & Winn, 2006). Since music is readily available, individuals who choose not to utilize it, may still encounter it at some point throughout the day while going about their normal activities.**

Usually, most children have a desire to succeed and do well in school. However, many children fall beneath the standards of normal readiness expectations in regards to reading and literacy. Gregory Taylor (2009), vice president for programs at the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, said that of the 4 million children who enter kindergarten each year in the United States, as many as one million are not ready to learn. Finding ways to help children accomplish the sometimes overwhelming task of learning to read in fun, yet educational, ways is the goal of many

educators. Accomplishing reading readiness in ways children will enjoy and remember could transpire through musical literacy education.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Dealing with reading intervention for struggling readers can be quite frustrating to some educators. The literacy instruction of struggling readers has been a topic for decades (Jacobs, 2009). Concerns exist regarding intervention-based reading programs implemented in schools because little is known about the effectiveness of these reading programs for struggling readers (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). A review of the literature indicated that much research has occurred regarding the general topic of music and education. One source said that the musical play of children is a worldwide activity (Lew & Campbell, 2005). Yet, few studies have focused on utilizing song lyrics to aid in reading readiness. One study revealed that using music to teach reading does influence the development of literacy (Fisher, 2001). These findings introduced a new realm of possibility to the classroom during literacy instruction. Educators, parents, and caregivers that teach songs to children or engage them in word play activities would provide them with a solid foundation in reading readiness.

As mentioned before, the study explored the effects of exposure to song text in literacy instruction, implementing a qualitative approach. Exposure to a large variety of both familiar and unfamiliar songs, chants, and rhymes became a crucial part of the curriculum in literacy instruction. Exploring the use of song text in literacy instruction answered the following questions: Did the children prefer word play activities over singing? Did the use of text in music and chants lead students to desire reading readiness and alphabet recognition activities? Did the implementation of songs or chants, both familiar and new, encourage children to use them outside of the literacy block? Were children observed using songs or word play while exploring

reading-related activities on their own?

The following examples clarified the activities that were a part of this study. During the literacy timeframe, students were led to sing songs as a way to enhance the day's literacy activities. For example, on days when letter recognition was being taught, the children sang songs such as *The Alphabet Song*. Magnetic letters were passed out to the students to put on the board from A to Z as the song was sung. During a lesson on spelling, the children sang songs such as *B-I-N-G-O* or *The B-I-B-L-E*. Connections to letter and word recognition was also appropriate with those types of songs. Other activities included the use of nursery rhymes set to music. This method was implemented during lessons that focused on rhyming words. Examples of other songs that were used included *Mary had a Little Lamb*, *Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star*, *Row, Row, Row Your Boat*, and *The Itsy Bitsy Spider*. Words from every song were used for the word wall, to which students could refer during writing workshops. A word wall is a list of keywords taken from song lyrics and displayed where the children could easily see them in the classroom.

### **Song, Word Play and Reading Readiness**

Young children are drawn to music and musical activities. From the moment their children are born, many caregivers sing, hum, or play silly chanting games, such as *Patty Cake* or *This Little Piggy Went to Market*. Sometimes parents play music to help their children sleep. Young children have a natural tendency to play with sounds in language (Yopp & Yopp, 2009). Later, when they enter school, children seem to thrive in environments where music is used for positive learning experiences (Paquette & Rieg, 2008). Trollinger (2010) stated that singing activates the whole brain. Other parts of the brain are more engaged when learning particular aspects of song. She also said that adding a tune or engaging in call and response activities are not only fun

but would definitely engage more areas of the brain to help language development.

Other studies have investigated the importance of song and clap routines in regard to culture and preferred learning styles (Pinkard, 2001). The benefits of song and rhythm in pre-kindergarten settings have been studied with positive results. Studies have been conducted in early childhood settings that have investigated the benefits of song and rhyme in relation to the development of vocabulary and language. In one study, Lloyd (1978) stated that reading teachers and their use of music aids emergent readers. She said, both depend upon being able to perceive likenesses and differences in sounds and in the shapes of symbols [auditory and visual discrimination]. Music is read from left to right and top to bottom, the same as reading words [eye-motor coordination] (pp.323-327).

In addition, participation in song activities helps in vocabulary development (Morrow, 1996). The use of song lyrics with adolescents who display learning disabilities has been met with success. Music is an important part of the everyday lives of adolescents (Olson, 2006). One way to appeal to adolescents with learning disabilities is to incorporate the use of lyrics from their favorite songs in their reading programs (Moore, 2007). If music is beneficial to the youngest groups - such as those in pre-school settings, and older groups - including those with learning disabilities, it only stands to reason that these benefits may be extended into other classroom settings.

### **Song Lyrics in the Classroom**

Researchers have supported the view that children who participate in activities which incorporate music are more likely to stay on task and display positive behaviors (Colwell, 1994; Madsen, 1991). Kouri and Talander (2008) said that numerous researchers have conducted studies using music. Most have reported positive effects on areas which are related to literacy

skills. Pinkard (2001) said that researchers have found a difference in the learning styles of European-American students and African-American students. In this study, rap music and clap routines were used with a group of African-American students and were met with great success in the development of literacy skills.

When working with young children, Yopp & Yopp (2009) suggest the use of songs, word play activities, and reading to teach literacy skills. Singing activates both hemispheres of the brain. When a singer concentrates on learning the words of a song, the temporal region in the left side of the brain is more engaged, but when learning the melody of a song, the right side is more engaged (Trollinger, 2010). Trollinger also stated that if children sing vocabulary lists, paragraphs from reading assignments, or poems in a recitative style it may help develop comprehension, vocabulary, and grammatical understanding. As a way to help children learn phonics and build phonemic awareness skills, Routman (2003) suggested the use of songs in literacy instruction. Using songs in the classroom also aids in the development of automaticity, which is defined as knowing what to say and producing language without pauses (Paquette & Rieg, 2008).

### **Summary of Literature**

Literature suggested that there was reason to believe that implementing song lyrics and wordplay into literacy lessons would aid children in reading readiness (Fisher, 2001). The use of singing is engaging and enjoyable to students as they gain skills necessary for success in reading and literacy (Kouri & Winn, 2006). Researchers who have studied the use of song lyrics and wordplay activities in the classroom have indicated that the benefits are worth the time and effort of implementing them in a variety of educational settings (Colwell, 1994). Music aids children in vocabulary development, phonemic awareness, fluency, and phonological awareness. Word play

activities, chants, and jump rope jingles are also appealing to children and have a sing-song effect. Buchoff (1994) defined chants as the rhythmic speaking of sounds, words, or rhymes in unison.

Numerous studies pertaining to the use of music in the classroom and its use with other cultures have been written in which the positive benefits to children are explored. The literature also contained numerous studies in which music and word play was beneficial to students with learning disabilities and English language learners (Paquette & Rieg, 2008). Young children in preschool settings experience enjoyment with song and word play activities as they build vocabulary and gain skills for school readiness (Yopp & Yopp, 2009).

### **Research Design**

This project utilized an action research design. Although this action research focused on one classroom, it was qualitative in nature. The purpose was not necessarily to test a theory but to incorporate a new type of instruction during the literacy learning block of time. Qualitative methods included observations of the students during literacy instruction and unstructured interviews. Parents were asked to complete a short questionnaire based on the reactions of their children to the literacy activities they were involved with at school.

As with many learning experiences, the enthusiasm of the educator aided in the determination of success. The study used observations to determine if children preferred learning with the aid of music. Because of the playful nature of the study, most children appeared to enjoy and look forward to the activities. Although there was a large volume of musical subject matter available, the children did not become weary of the activities.

### **Population and Sample**

The research focused on the benefits of singing and word play during literacy

instruction. Through the use of convenience sampling, one classroom involving children in kindergarten and first grade was under study. This group was selected since they were the students of the researcher. The sample size was small and consisted of seven students. This sample size was sufficient for the purpose of the study as the results were not intended to be generalized to the entire population. At times, the children were divided into subgroups: the kindergarten group and the first grade group. However, the majority of the time the research was conducted on one group as a whole. The qualitative approach was primarily an action research and was conducted only by the researcher. A classroom paraprofessional occasionally assisted in the collection of data.

A small group of children in a private school classroom participated in the study over the course of approximately thirteen weeks. Through the duration of the study, the children were exposed to a series of familiar and unfamiliar song lyrics and wordplay activities that may aid them in reading readiness. The students who took part in the study consisted of Caucasian, African-American, and Hispanic children. Both boys and girls were in the classroom, and they were between the ages of five and eight years old. All students in the study were either in kindergarten or first grade.

### **Innovation**

During the literacy block, songs that focused on letter sounds, rhyming words, or other reading related concepts were sung with participation from the class. A word wall is a list of keywords taken from song lyrics and displayed where the children could easily see them in the classroom. The words were used for the children to play a version of the card game “*Go Fish*”. They could also use the words or letters to play memory match games. A guitar or piano was played during some of the songs. A jump rope was used for jump rope jingles during

physical education as an extension of the literacy lesson. Occasionally, video and voice recordings were used to collect data from the activities.

### **Instrumentation**

Several data-collection instruments were used for this study. These instruments included an informed consent parental permission letter, a consent to participate form, a student observation sheet, and a parent survey. The informed consent parental permission letter accompanied the consent to participate form and was hand delivered or mailed to all parents of students in the kindergarten and first grade classroom.

The student observation form was used while observing children who were engaged in the songs or clap routines inside and outside of the literacy block. Since children can be spontaneous, an abundance of these forms were available to the observer for easy access when needed.

A survey was sent to the parents with the hope of discovering if or how their children were applying the literacy activities outside of school hours. Comments by parents who wished to relate an anecdote or comment from their child prior to or following the survey was also considered for use in the study.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

Data was collected in a variety of ways. Observations were made during and outside of class time. The researcher and paraprofessional were cognizant of children singing the songs or performing the word play activities outside of the literacy block. Humming quietly to themselves or singing songs used during literacy instruction, while on the playground, or at lunchtime was documented. The researcher participated as an observer, interviewer, and leader of activities. During the leading out of activities, the classroom paraprofessional occasionally

took notes. Some of the games and activities were put in the literacy centers. Observations were made of the children's use of them during center time.

### **Student Interview Protocol**

Student interviews and observations would be a large part of the data collection process. Each child was given the opportunity to participate in the interviews, though none were forced to answer the questions. While being encouraged to join in the music-based activities, no child was forced to participate. Children were interviewed immediately following an activity, a few hours after the activity, or the next day. The purpose for waiting to conduct some of the interviews was to give a child time to reflect before being interviewed.

A voice recorder was considered for use while conducting interviews with a student, during the singing of songs, or while engaging in wordplay activities. One foreseen problem with the voice recorder could be that comments would not be audible during transcription. To help offset this possibility, the classroom paraprofessional would be asked to make observations while the voice recorder was in use.

The researcher planned for planned for the occasional use of a video camera. The camera would be placed in locations which caused little distraction. Should a child feel uncomfortable being filmed, strides would be taken to place the child outside the camera's range. The video would be used at a later time to record the multiple anecdotes which could take place during or after group activities. The camera would also be useful in revealing unnoticed student reactions by the researcher while the children engaged in singing, chants, or word play.

### **Data Analysis Methods**

Data analysis methods included a form of coding that consisted of labeled columns and was helpful when comparing observations and comments that had been recorded on the

form. Labels included “positive comments”, “negative comments”, “lack of participation”, or “active engagement”. As the study commenced, the realization came that other labels were necessary, such as “pouting from not being called first” and “requests for more singing”. Even though this was a qualitative action research, there were times when percentages were used when reporting results of data collection. Attitudes, exhibited behavior, and anecdotes were included when reporting the results of the study.

### **Ethics and Human Relations**

This study imposed no threats to any participants. The children were familiar with the researcher since she was their classroom teacher. No anxiety from unknown individuals was upon any student. Most of the study commenced during the regular literacy timeframe and the setting had a relaxed atmosphere.

Since the researcher was also an employee of the study site, gaining access was not a problem. A request for permission was presented to the school principal and school board prior to the study. Consent for participation forms were sent to the parents of every child who would be a part of the study.

Some problems that arose were from not receiving the permission slips in a timely manner. Parents who did not respond by the given date were personally contacted. Any parents who expressed the desire that their child not participate in the study would be assured that anything which happened that pertained to their child would not be included in the report. However, parents would be informed that, since the research would be taking place in the classroom in which their child is a student, their child would still be present during the study.

### **Timeline**

The timeline for the study was approximately 13-14 weeks. The research was not

conducted every school day but rather two to four times per week, depending on the concepts being taught during the literacy block. The literacy lessons varied in length due to the attention spans of young children. Lessons were planned to last from 10-20 minutes.

Permission slips were hand delivered or mailed to the parents during the first full week of school. The parents were asked to return the permission slips within one week and were offered the options of leaving them at the school office, hand delivering them to their child's teacher, or by return mail. Parents who had not returned their permission slips by the suggested due date were contacted and urged to return it quickly in order for the study to commence in a timely fashion. No verbal consent for permission was accepted.

### **Preparation**

Prior to the study, much time was spent collecting appropriate songs and word play activities from songbooks for children, internet sources, and personal childhood memories. The lyrics were written in three chart tablets which were used during the study. Poster board was uniformly cut into rectangular shapes for the posting of keywords from the lyrics. The words written on the poster board strips were displayed for a song lyrics word wall. Unlike typical word walls, no pictures accompanied the words derived from the song lyrics.

### **Data Collection**

Data collection began immediately at the outset of the study which began within the first three weeks of school. The students began the study by participating in songs or word play activities which incorporated the use of the alphabet, such as *The Alphabet Song*. Next was the incorporation of songs or word play activities which included letter sounds, such as *Miss Mary Mack*, which focuses on the sound of the letter "Mm". This portion of the study took a few weeks to complete since it covered most of the 26 letters of the alphabet. Following the alphabet

activities, the children engaged in spelling songs such as *I Can't Spell Hippopotamus, Bingo, or I Am a "C"*. The final segment of the study utilized the use of songs and word play activities which included rhyming words. Those songs included *A Sailor Went to Sea, Sea, Sea, or Say, Say, Oh Playmate*.

### **Characteristics of Participants, Classroom, School, and Community**

A total of seven children participated in the study. Two children were in kindergarten and five were in the first grade. Two of the children were Hispanic, two were African-American, and three were Caucasian. The first grade students sat at desks that faced a whiteboard in the front of the classroom. The kindergarten children sat on chairs in front of the first graders' desks.

The school adjoins the church which sits on a busy four-lane road that is one of the major thoroughfares in the city. The current facility was rebuilt in 1993 and accommodates four classrooms, a library, and a computer lab on the upper level. A daycare center, a large gymnasium, and a full-sized kitchen are on the lower level.

The community that surrounded the study site was made up of homes, businesses, churches, and schools.

### **Interviews and Surveys**

Each parent was asked to fill out a survey which asked questions about the study in relation to their children. All but two of the parents returned the survey, but one who did not return the survey informed the instructor during a parent/teacher conference that her child sings all the time when he is at home. Of those parents who filled out the survey, every one marked that his or her child preferred using song lyrics to traditional literacy instruction. Three parents said their children sing nonstop at home and in the car. Two said they enjoyed listening to their children sing while they are using the restroom or in the bathtub. One parent said the family could never

let her child know they could hear her singing in the restroom or she would never sing again.

When asked if they liked using songs to learn letters, sounds, and words every child said “yes”. When asked if they had a favorite song that had been sung the responses varied. Three children said their favorite song was *Alligator*. The other four children named different songs or clapping rhymes. One of the questions asked if the children taught the songs they learned to friends or family members at home. Two children said that they taught songs to a brother or sister. When asked if the children ever sang the songs at home, Student A said she did not. However, her mother’s survey was the one which reported that the family enjoyed listening to her sing nonstop while in the restroom.

### **Requests for Songs Outside the Literacy Block of Time**

The researcher had cut flower shapes and attached them to craft sticks. Each flower had the name of a song on the front side and the lyrics to the song on the backside. The flowers were laminated and stuck in green Styrofoam. The flower arrangement had been displayed on top of the piano. Usually, the songs would be used during worship time. However, due to the extra singing that would be taking place during the study, the researcher decided not to use the flower songs until after the completion of the study.

One day, as the class was preparing for math, Student B raised her hand and asked what the flowers were for. The researcher referred to the display as a "Garden of Song".

"What are you supposed to do with them?" asked Student C.

The children were told that somebody comes and "picks" a flower and the class sings the song printed on the front. Student B asked if the class could pick some flowers and sing the songs. Most of the hands in the class went up in the air begging for a turn.

"Do you mean right now?" asked the researcher. "That's a lot of singing," she warned.

"We don't care!" the children shouted.

"Okay, then! Student B gets to go first since it was her idea," replied the researcher.

Student B came to the front of the room, studied the flowers, and pulled one out of the Styrofoam.

"Before we sing, can you please tell me if you know the name of this song?" asked the researcher. Student B was a good reader and easily read the title of the song, *Jesus Loves the Little Ones*. Comments such as "Oh, I love that song!" and "Can we sing it two times?" filled the air.

By the end of the activity, every child had selected a flower. A total of seven songs were sung in one sitting and no child displayed inappropriate behavior. While this activity did not occur during the literacy timeframe, it was noted that the children were choosing to request songs outside of the study.

### **Student Behavior**

The first day of the research, no mention was made to the children of what was about to take place. The students were gathered at the front of the room waiting expectantly for the researcher, who was also their teacher, to work with them. The researcher, carrying a chart tablet, propped it up in front of the students and opened it to the first page of lyrics. Immediately, one kindergarten child, Student D, burst into song singing "A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P". The other children joined in with the singing to the end of the song. The dynamics of the classroom changed in an instant from being quiet and low key to loud and exuberant. When the children finished singing, the astonished researcher asked Student D how she knew those lyrics were to *The Alphabet Song*. The child said, "Because it has letters. Can we sing it again?" No one waited for the researcher to reply. Instantly, the class began singing

as the students repeated *The Alphabet Song*. The researcher joined in by pointing to each individual letter or word.

"Wow!" cried the researcher. "That was wonderful!"

The next day, the chart tablet was positioned for all the children to see. The page was once again turned to *The Alphabet Song*. The researcher asked the children if they would like to put magnetic letters on the board while singing the song. Shouts of "Me!" and "I do!" filled the room. The letters were divided up between the children. Since there were only seven students in the room, every child had at least three letters. As the children sang the song, they filed up to the front of the room and put the corresponding letters on the board. One kindergarten child did not yet recognize any letters or sounds. The first grade students coached her as to when to put her letters on the board.

The following day was spent without of the use of song lyrics during literacy instruction. The children were not exuberant or excited and there were times when it became necessary to speak to a child for inappropriate behavior. In comparing the atmosphere of the class between the two instructional methods, it was noted that there were no instances of disruption while singing song lyrics but there were occasional disruptions during traditional instruction without the use of song. During instruction using song lyrics, the children were usually very excited and every child participated. During instruction without lyrics, it occasionally became necessary to call a child's name to help him or her focus on what was being presented.

### **Activities and Assessments**

To determine whether or not learning had truly taken place, some of the songs introduced during the study were sung just once. However, some of the children may have been familiar

with many of the songs prior to the study. After singing a song, the researcher would ask the children if there were any important words in the song which could be put on the song lyrics word wall. At first the children had to be coached in naming the important words. After a few songs, however, the children quickly caught on and began calling out key words before they were asked. The words were written on the board until a later time, usually after school, at which point they were written on a poster board strip and adhered to the wall. Sometimes a word that was already on the word wall would be suggested. The researcher would point to the word wall and inform the children that the word was already used from another song.

One of the first assessment activities was conducted in a pre-test/post-test style. One morning, the researcher asked the children to write the word “Jesus”. Both of the kindergarten children and two of the first grade children immediately informed the researcher that they did not know how to spell. The researcher explained to the children that teachers are naturally curious and she just wanted to know if any children in the room could spell “Jesus”. Handing each child a piece of paper and a pencil, she once again asked if they would please spell “Jesus”. The kindergarten children sat motionless.

“I don’t know how to spell,” repeated Student D.

“Me either,” said a frowning Student A.

The first grade children said nothing after being asked a second time to write “Jesus” on their papers. After each child had finished writing, the researcher collected their papers. Student A had become so frustrated that she refused to try. Student D wrote some letters on her paper, but many of the letters were not in the word “Jesus” and some were not properly formed. Three of the first grade children correctly wrote the word, but the other two first graders could not correctly spell “Jesus”. The next day, the class sang to the tune of “*Bingo*”,

“There is a friend I love so much

And Jesus is His name!

J-E-S-U-S,

J-E-S-U-S,

J-E-S-U-S

And Jesus is His name!”

The second verse called for the children to clap instead of naming the first letter:

(Clap) –E-S-U-S. In the third verse the children clap for the first two letters (Clap, clap)-S-U-

S. Each verse continues in this fashion until it ends with all the letters being clapped instead of sung. The children enjoyed this song so much that they begged to sing it again.

“Maybe we will sing it again,” the researcher replied. After that, the song was sung no more until after the post-test a few weeks later.

One month later, the researcher handed out pieces of paper and asked the children to write the name “Jesus”. Once again, Student A became agitated because she could not spell.

“I can’t do it!” she kept repeating. Finally the researcher said, “But can you sing, can’t you?”

“Sing what?” asked Student A. The researcher hummed the tune of the song which spelled the name of Jesus. Student A sat motionless for a few moments and then began to write.

“Here,” Student A announced flatly as she pushed her paper toward the researcher. When the researcher picked up all the papers, every child, including Student A, had correctly spelled the name “Jesus”.

Several times throughout the study reference was made to the word wall without the researcher reading any of the words. One of the words on the word wall was “alligator”. This

action song about an alligator was listed as the favorite song during interviews by 42% of the class. Although there were numerous requests to sing this song throughout the study, the class sang *Alligator* just once. As the group sang, the researcher ran her finger under the lyrics on the word chart while the children performed the motions to the song. Two weeks later, before the word had been added to the word wall, the researcher held "alligator" up in front of the kindergarten children. She started to ask, "Does anyone ---".

"ALLIGATOR", interrupted Student D.

"How did you know this word says 'alligator'?" asked the researcher.

"Because it looks familiar, Student D responded.

A few weeks after the word "alligator" was added to the word wall, the researcher typed the lyrics to the song on a sheet of paper. "Alligator" was used three times in the song. Each kindergarten child was called one at a time to work with the researcher. With no instructions other than to circle any words that looked familiar, both kindergarten children stared blankly at the many words. Student A, who did not recognize any letters of the alphabet when the year began, was the quickest to circle all the words which said "alligator". When asked what the words said, she seemed disinterested as she answered, "alligator." When asked how she knew, she said, "I just know."

When her turn came, Student D, who had been doing quite well in school, seemed to struggle with this activity. She stared at the paper and said, "I can't read."

"Just do your best," the researcher urged.

Student D turned back to her paper. She sat there for a few minutes. Suddenly she jerked her head up to look at the word wall. She quickly turned back to her paper and began circling all the words which said "alligator". When she was finished, she pushed her paper toward the

researcher.

“What do those words say?” she was asked.

“Alligator”, was Student D’s response.

"How do you know they say 'alligator'?"

"Because it's up on the wall," Student D replied matter of factly.

“Alligator” was displayed in the top, left corner of the word wall. It remained in that spot until the last week of the study. One morning, the researcher entered the room early and rearranged several of the words on the word wall. “Alligator” was one of the words that were moved. It was placed several rows over and near the bottom of one column. Nothing was mentioned about the word wall all day until shortly before dismissal. One of the first graders asked if they could sing a song.

“Which song do you want to sing?” the researcher asked.

Student D hollered, “Alligator!”

“Well, I have to know how the word looks so I can find it in the chart,” the researcher replied.

Student D leaped from her seat and went to the word wall. With no hesitation she pointed to the word “alligator” in its new location.

“Hey! It’s in a different place!” remarked Student B, who was in the first grade.

On another occasion, the class had sung the song “*Found an Ff*” to the tune of *Found a Peanut*. After singing the song, letter cards were scattered around on the classroom floor. Among the many letter cards, several contained the letter “Ff”. As the children sang the song again, they roamed around the classroom gathering up the cards which contained the letter “Ff”. The first grade group scooped up the appropriate cards before the two kindergarten children had a chance to find any. As they all returned to their seats, the kindergarten children

had long faces. “We didn’t find any,” mumbled Student D.

“Yeah,” said Student A. “The first graders got ‘em all.”

The researcher looked over at the faces of the first graders. They were grinning from ear to ear with pleasure at having found all the “Ff” cards before the kindergarten group could pick any of them up.

Suddenly, Student A inquired, “What about the other letters?” The researcher assured the children that those letters were going to be found as well and that the kindergarten group was going to go first.

“Let’s look for the letter “Mm”, suggested the researcher. Instantly, Student D switched the lyrics from “Found an Ff” to “Found an Mm” while the rest of the class followed her lead. The children in kindergarten roamed about the room collecting the “Mm” cards.

“Okay, now let’s let the first grade children find the “Ee” cards, said the researcher. Once again the lyrics changed to “Found an “Ee”. The children were leading out and making the changes in the lyrics each time a new letter was found until every letter had been picked up from the floor.

During yet another assessment, the researcher typed the list of words from the word wall (Appendix A). The words were typed in the same order as their locations on the word wall. The children were asked to take out their crayons and to use their best listening skills. When the group was ready, the researcher said, “Take a purple crayon and color the word which says, ‘Jesus’”. Student A’s countenance instantly fell as she said, “I can’t read.”

“Well, do you know how to spell “Jesus”? the researcher asked.

“Yes”, said Student A.

“Well, why don’t you spell it for me,” the researcher suggested.

“J-E-S-U-S,” she spelled. An intent look came over Student A’s face for several

seconds. Suddenly, she turned back to her paper, searched the words, and began coloring the word which said “Jesus”.

Next, the researcher asked the group to take a yellow crayon and color the word that said “hippopotamus”. This word came from the song *I Can't Spell Hippopotamus*. The class was quiet as each student intently searched his or her list for the correct word. Yellow crayons began to move back and forth on the papers. From where the researcher was seated, she could see that the correct word was being colored on several of the papers. Next, the children were instructed to take a red crayon and color the word “Bingo”. The room was absolutely silent as each child studied his or her list of words. Several other words were colored with varying colors of crayons during this assessment. Occasionally a child would pause, look at the song lyrics word wall, and then return to his or her paper and begin coloring a word. When the activity was completed, the children were instructed to write their names on the backs of their papers and bring them to the researcher.

Later, when the papers were reviewed, it was noted that 100% of the first grade children correctly colored the words on their papers. In reviewing the kindergarten papers, it was noted that Student D had colored all of her words correctly, but Student A did not color the word “alligator” orange, even though she was seen pointing to it. Student A also did not color the word “happy”.

Another assessment with the kindergarten group was a game that made use of the words on the song lyrics word wall. The object of the game was to play a game similar to *Go Fish*. As the cards were handed out, the student informed the researcher that she could not read.

“Can you spell?” asked the researcher. Student A did not respond.

“Well, I’m going to start the game and I want to ask you if you have the word “Bingo”.

“I can’t read,” the student repeated.

“But you can sing!” the researcher responded. Student A looked down at the table for a few seconds with her mouth silently moving. Her lips were quietly forming the words of the song:

“There was a farmer, had a dog,

And Bingo was his name-o.

B-I-N-G-O,

B-I-N-G-O,

B-I-N-G-O

And Bingo was his name-o”

Putting her head up, the student looked at the cards in her hand, moved some back and forth, and then plopped one card upside down in front of the researcher. Slowly the researcher turned the card over. Neatly printed on the front of the card was the word “Bingo”.

“Good!” shouted the researcher.

“Now it’s my turn,” announced Student A. Turning to a classmate she said, “do you have any 'Gods'?”

Student D searched through her cards and said, “Go Fish!” Student A drew one card from the stack. With a smug look on her face, Student D turned to her classmate.

“Do you have any 'hippos'?”

Student A shuffled her cards. Stopping at one card, she began to sound the letters. “/H/-/I/-/P/...this says hip”, said Student A. The researcher could see Student A’s card, and it did not say “hip”. She was encouraged to try again.

“/H/-/I/-/P/...hip,” repeated Student A.

She was encouraged to try one more time. The researcher said nothing but strategically

rested her finger under the ending letter in “hippo”.

“HIPPO!” shouted Student A. “This says “hippo!” Almost throwing the card at her classmate in her excitement, her eyes shone brightly with the pride of reading the word correctly. At one point in the game, the children confused the words “God” and “good”. Both words use the same letters, and the two girls were having a difficult time recognizing the difference between the two. However, several weeks prior to playing the *Go Fish* game, the two girls had successfully circled the words “God” and put a square around the words “good” the day the lyrics to *God Is So Good* had been written on the board. After laying both cards side by side on the table, the researcher asked the girls if they could tell which word might say “God”. Since they were confused, the researcher asked them to sound out the word “God”. Then they tried to sound out the word “good” with the vowel digraph in the middle. Suddenly, Student D switched the position of the two words on the table as she pointed to each word and sang:

“God is so good,  
God is so good,  
God is so good,  
He’s so good to me.”

One final assessment took place during a memory match game. Word wall words were used for the game cards. Each card was turned face down on the table. The girls took turns turning two cards over looking for matches. The researcher encouraged them to read the words on each card. As they came to the word “bubble”, both girls froze.

“We don’t know that one,” Student D said.

“Well, it’s on our word wall,” the researcher replied.

Turning to look at the word wall, Student D studied the words before returning to the

game card. Picking it up, she compared the word on the card to the words on the wall. She began making the letter sounds of the first three letters in the word “bubble”. Stopping midway through, she blurted out “Bubble!”

“Yes!” agreed the researcher. “That word says 'bubble'. Can you find another one to match it?”

As the game progressed, Student A struggled with some of the words. During the study, no practicing of the words on the word wall had taken place. The student was beginning to apply letter sounds to many of the words and correctly deciphered several of them. While Student A was attempting to read one of the words, Student D said, “I know what it says!” She jumped out of her chair and ran around the table to whisper in the researcher’s ear. “It says birthday!” The researcher gave her an approving look. Student D returned to her seat. Later in the game, Student A was trying to sound out another word. After studying the word in her hand, Student D repeated her statement of knowing what it said and rushed around the table to whisper it in the researcher’s ear. Several times Student D rushed around to the other side of the table to whisper the word in the researcher’s ear. Every time she was correct.

Student A figured out many of the words. Sometimes the researcher would hum the tune of the song which used a particular word and Student A would figure out what it said by singing the song. On two occasions, Student D burst into song after Student A correctly read a word.

The first grade group was ahead of the kindergarten group in literacy skills. Some of the first graders were reading while others were still developing reading skills. After singing a song, the researcher often used first grade children to check the work during an activity being performed by the kindergarten children. For example, after singing the song, *Miss Mary Mack*, the researcher asked one of the kindergarten children to go to the board and circle all the “Mm’s”

in the lyrics. After circling the correct letters, the researcher turned to the first grade children and asked them if there were any more “M’s”. On several occasions, a first grade student would inform the kindergarten children that they missed a letter. If the kindergarten child could not locate the skipped letter, a first grade child would come up and show the kindergarten child the location of the missing letter.

The song lyrics were many times written on the board. During some of the activities or assessments, the researcher would ask the first grade children to come and circle particular words. One day, the class sang *Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star*. After the class had suggested keywords from the song for the word wall, one child was invited to come to the board and put a line under all the words which said “twinkle”. The next child was asked to circle all the words that said “star”. Another first grade child was asked to put a box around all the words that rhymed. Each time a child came to the board, he or she would pause to study the lyrics. Some would sing the song out loud until they found the words to be marked. Other first grade children would correct a classmate at the board if they incorrectly marked or missed a word.

One day, the researcher asked the children to turn around and look at the word wall. “That’s a lot of words, isn’t it?” she asked. “Why, I think I could make up my own song using words from the word wall. In fact, I think I’ll sing one right now.”

Using the tune of *Ten Little Indians* the researcher sang,

“Alligator, hippo, sheep,

Alligator, hippo, sheep.

Alligator, hippo, sheep

I see them when I sleep!”

The class laughed and all started talking at once. Student B became rather excited and asked if the students could make up their own songs.

“Certainly!” replied the researcher. Each of you can begin thinking of your own song using the words from our word wall, and tomorrow you can sing them for the class.”

“Yippee!” shouted the children.

The next morning, shortly after the start of the school day, the classroom paraprofessional approached the researcher and informed her that she had forgotten to report that the children had chosen to play *London Bridge* outside the literacy block while in the gym for recess a couple of days ago.

“Really?” said the researcher, who noticed that class had heard the report. “Well, why don’t we play it right now!”

Instantly the children were on their feet. The two adults hooked their hands together to make an arch while the children circled around during the singing of the song. At the appropriate time, the adults dropped their arms, capturing one or two children in the middle:

“London Bridge is falling down,

Falling down,

Falling down.

London Bridge is falling down,

My fair lady! (or gentleman) (Adults drop arms to cage one or two children. Rocking the captured child back and forth, the song continued) :

Take the keys and lock her (him) up,

Lock her (him) up,

Lock her (him) up!

Take the keys and lock her (him) up,  
My fair lady (gentleman)!”

The children laughed and sang as each child was captured and rocked back and forth while in the middle. The children had barely returned to their seats when Student B raised her hand and asked if she could sing her song from the word wall which had been talked about the day before.

“Wonderful idea!” exclaimed the researcher. “Would you like to go first?”

Student B straightened in her chair as she sang to a made-up tune:

“Fall is down  
Sky is falling  
Fall is down.”

Everyone laughed and cheered.

“Who’s next?” the researcher asked. Student G’s hand shot into the air.

“Me!” he pleaded.

“Okay, we’re ready when you are.”

With a big grin on his face, Student G used his own tune as he sang:

“Cat loves pizza,  
Friends love pizza,  
Hippo loves pizza,  
Bingo loves pizza,  
Jesus loves pizza!”

The children continued to laugh and cheer after each performance, then began pleading to go next. Each of the children sang their made-up songs, some to familiar tunes. The class had

just finished this activity when the door opened and one child, who was tardy, entered the room. Student E hung up his jacket and made his way to his seat. The children told Student E that he had missed playing “London Bridge” with the class.

“Let’s go back to the middle of the room so he can have a turn,” the researcher said.

The children rushed back to the middle of the room and the two adults once again formed an arch. The class, including Student E, circled under the bridge while singing. Catching Student E in the middle, he was rocked back and forth inside the cage as everybody sang. The children returned to their seats for the second time and were just getting settled when Student E raised his hand and said, “I didn’t get to sing my song.”

“Okay, why don’t you sing it for us right now?”

Student E thought for a moment and then turned to study the word wall. He suddenly said, “Oh!” With a sheepish grin on his face, and using the tune to *London Bridge*, he faced the class and sang,

“Water Bingo on my head,

On my head,

On my head!

Water Bingo on my head,

So we can get we-et!”

The class burst into laughter.

“Wow! That was great! Everybody did a wonderful job with their songs!” the researcher exclaimed. Two children asked if they could make up another song from the word wall.

“You most certainly can!” replied the researcher. “We will do this again!”

## Results

Throughout this study, the children clearly preferred the use of song lyrics to aid them in their learning. The difference between the two teaching methods – the use of lyrics and traditional lectures – resulted in two different atmospheres in the classroom. Each time song lyrics were used, the class was instantly at attention and all were engaged.

On several occasions, children could be heard singing or humming to themselves. Two favorite times to sing were during lunch or while in the restroom. One day after lunch, Student D came out of the restroom. While she had been inside, the researcher could hear her singing at the top of her lungs, “Love your neighbor as yourself for God loves all”. As she came out of the restroom, she bashfully looked at the researcher. She staggered her words as she said, “I-can’t-stop-singing.”

“It’s a good song, isn’t it,” the researcher asked.

“Mmm-hmm.” Student D said. “I can’t get it out of my mind. But I don’t want to.”

One day during lunchtime, Student C (first grade) was quietly sitting at the table. Suddenly, he said to no one in particular, “Why is there always a song in my head?” Instances such as these have led the researcher to believe that singing aids in the reinforcement of learning literacy skills. Students may not be interested in memorizing lists of words, but they will repeatedly sing a song containing words that will aid them in their reading while at the same time practicing fluency. For the purpose of this study, several of the songs were only sung once. Yet, learning had obviously taken place since no regular practice of the words on the word wall had occurred.

While turning the pages of a chart tablet filled with lyrics one day during their center time, the kindergarten children became quite excited as they recognized the *Alphabet Song*, *The Pizza Song*, *Bingo*, *J-E-S-U-S*, and several other songs that the class had sung during the course of the

study. They ran their fingers under the lyrics as they sang some of the words. They were incredibly excited to recognize many of the songs.

During the study, any song that was sung became a candidate for words to be added to the word wall. One day, near the end of the study, the class was in choir learning a new song to be sung during their upcoming Christmas program. The children were gathered around the piano as the researcher played the melody. One first grade child, Student E, tapped the researcher on the shoulder and said, "Teacher, we need to add the word 'remember' to our word wall."

On another occasion, the class was practicing another song for the Christmas program. Student G (first grade) said, "We have to put 'Bethlehem' on our word wall."

Clearly, the children saw no distinction in songs in relation to learning. All lyrics were being counted as important. An example of this mindset came one day when another classroom consisting of students in grades 2-3 joined the K-1 class for choir to practice their music for Christmas. After seeing how the children in the study were showing an intense interest in song lyrics, the researcher typed the lyrics to the songs to be sung in the Christmas program. She was curious to see the reaction of the students who had been in the study if the lyrics were only given to the older children. The researcher instructed the teacher for grades 2-3 to only share the lyrics with her own class. Instantly there were several children in the study who asked, "Don't we get any words?"

"Do you want the words?" asked the researcher.

Cries of "Yes!" came from the K-1 group. The lyrics were given to the first grade children. Immediately one of the kindergarten children angrily folded her arms across her chest and began pouting. The other child, Student D, asked, "How come we don't get any?" Someone from the older class said, "Because you can't read!"

“Yes we can!” the two kindergarten children retorted.

The researcher thought it was interesting to note that at times during the study one or both kindergarten children would insist they could not read. However, when lyrics were withheld from them, they adamantly insisted that they could read. Even though the kindergarten group was still in the pre-reading stages, the lyrics were handed to them.

### **Summary**

The results of this study have shown that the use of song lyrics, clapping games and chants in the literacy block of time not only aids in letter identification, letter sounds, and reading, or reading readiness, but also engages the children in a fun and positive learning atmosphere. The students appeared to be excited to sing songs and to take part in the activities that followed. While they enjoyed all the songs, they seemed to prefer those which incorporated some type of action.

The limitation of this study stated that no guarantee could be made that the children would be familiar with all the tunes or lyrics they would be using. The researcher thought it was interesting to note that on several occasions during the introduction to a song, which used unfamiliar lyrics with a familiar tune, that most of the children would announce that they did not know the tune. For instance, one day the chart was set up for the children to see the words. The researcher informed the children that the lyrics they would be singing used the tune of a song most of them probably knew.

"What song is it?" asked Student E.

"Pop! Goes the Weasel," answered the researcher. Several of the children, including Student E, said that they did not know that song. However, when the singing began, Student E and another child, who said he did not know the song, carried the tune flawlessly. At the end of

the song, Student E announced that he did know the song and he began singing the original lyrics. Student G told the class that she had *Pop! Goes the Weasel* on a tape at home. Student C informed the class that while he said he did not know the song, he really did. Then he said, "Oh, and what's a weasel?"

On more than one occasion, the children appeared to be unfamiliar with a tune until they heard its melody. Once they recognized the song, they would inform the researcher that they used to listen to it in their homes. The researcher assumed that the children were recalling from memory songs for kids that had been played for them outside of school hours.

Some of the new songs were sung several times. However, it was not necessary for the children to repeatedly sing songs in which they were quite familiar. The children in kindergarten began requesting permission to look at books during their rest time. In addition, while looking at books on their own, students always became quite excited when it was discovered that there was a song at the end of a story. Every time a child found a song at the back of a story they would rush across the room to share their discovery with the researcher. On many occasions, a child would inform the researcher that they were going to have to sing the song. Parents began reporting that their children were reading, or attempting to read, everything while riding in the car to and from school.

The children took their learning to a higher level when they created their own songs to perform before their peers outside of the literacy block. The first grade children were observed on several occasions showing preference to the song lyrics word wall over the traditional word wall that had visual clues. When the children sang the lyrics to themselves outside of school hours or on the playground, they were oblivious that they were reinforcing what they had learned.

Using song, the children displayed through their behavior that learning to read could be fun, rewarding, and satisfying. It was decided that, due to the success of learning through song, the literacy instruction in the K-1 classroom would include the use of lyrics each school year. As a reward for being a part of the study, the children were served banana splits at lunchtime and were given extra play time at recess.

### **Discussion**

The completion of a study gave hindsight to the researcher. Changes that could be made or activities that could have been added all come to mind when reflecting on the outcome of a study. In reflecting back on the research that took place using song lyrics, it must be said that the recognition of words that were beyond the kindergarten and first grade reading levels was surprising. Using the words found in many popular songs for children proved what prior researchers have stated. Literature has claimed that the use of song lyrics aids in reading and reading readiness. This study supported those claims.

### **Recommendations**

Educators who may find this research helpful in their literacy instruction can implement similar procedures as those outlined in this study. Since a great amount of time was required in the location and preparation of songs, planning is necessary. Writing the lyrics on chart tablets allows the materials to be used again. Creating materials prior to the study helps alleviate last minute preparations and results in less stress for the educator. Professionals who include the use of song lyrics in their literacy instruction will see how quickly children begin to recognize written words or phrases that are being sung in the classroom.

Other potential action research studies that could result from this research may include the use of song lyrics with English language learners or children with learning disabilities. The use

of song lyrics in the classroom will benefit any student at any age. The children always appeared to be much happier on days when they sang during literacy instruction. It helped to prove what

Proverbs 15:13 says:

"A merry heart maketh a cheerful countenance."

Appendix A

Word Recognition Assessment

alligator	happy	sun	home
clap	sheep	pizza	sat
down	twinkle	pop	miles
fall	diamond	me	letter
friend	star	he	hippopotamus
Jesus	sky	God	can't
love	we	good	comes
ring	together	air	spell
rose	more	blowing	cat

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