Using Song Lyrics to Develop Reading Skills

Galileo Inquiry Project

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Background Information

Literacy development, particularly early literacy development, is an aspect of education to which I feel deeply devoted. Far too often minority children and children from poverty are left behind in school due to reading challenges that are present in the early grades. Unfortunately, reading struggles exhibited early on can predict later achievement. As a person who experienced childhood poverty and witnessed the impact of educational practices on family members with dyslexic-type reading behaviors, I feel driven to help students with reading risk factors develop the skills and strategies that will help them become successful readers and citizens.

Throughout my teaching career I have worked intentionally to improve my teaching practice to help me meet the needs of all students, especially those most at-risk. As an intervention teacher I provide supplemental instruction to students demonstrating significant reading challenges. At times, my schedule allows me to work with boarder-line students, children who are on the verge of reading proficiency. For my inquiry project, I had the opportunity to work with such a group of first graders.

The first grade teachers in my school had expressed an ongoing desire to have their boarder-line students receive instructional support. Most of these students demonstrate many successful reading behaviors. As a result, they typically are not included in the Response to Intervention (RtI) groups. The perception of the classroom teacher’s was that these students primarily need instruction in the area of reading fluency to meet grade level expectations.

In order for me to meet with this additional reading group, it was necessary to make adjustments to the school’s master schedule. With the cooperation of the staff, changes were made that allowed me to meet with these children four days a week for 40 minutes. It was our
hope that this additional reading support would provide the assistance necessary to accelerate the children in order to meet third-quarter reading benchmarks.

Several of the teachers, including myself, had the opportunity hear Dr. Timothy Rasinski speak at the Prevention of Early Learning Failure conference. Dr. Rasinski’s research focus is in the area of literacy with an emphasis on fluency development. At the conference he spoke of several instructional methods that are effective in developing fluent reading. One method the team was particularly intrigued by was reading song lyrics. This approach to teaching reading was also appealing, as it seemed to be a way to incorporate the brain-base strategy of using music in the classroom discussed by Dr. Marcia Tate. Following a dialogue about the various options, the team agreed to use song lyrics as the instructional text for the intervention group.

Reading is a complex process requiring the integration of many skills in order to be proficient. Although the group was created with a fluency focus in mind, all reading instruction should assist students in developing the skills they need to become independent and proficient readers. The most significant difference between the work I have done with other intervention groups and this new first grade groups was the plan to use song lyrics as text. I was therefore left to wonder, “In what ways does reading song lyrics support the development of first grade reading skills?”

Sources of Information Collected

Prior to meeting with students, the first grade teachers and I collaborated to identify the children who would participate in intervention group. The team reviewed September, November, and January assessment data, considered the classroom teacher’s observations, and noted if the students had ever, or were currently, receiving RtI support. As the intent of this intervention was to meet the needs of students performing slightly below grade level the teachers
reviewed the Developmental Reading Assessment (D.R.A.) and Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (D.I.B.E.L.S.) scores from January to consider which assessment best matched their perception of how students were performing in the classroom. The team created a spreadsheet that included the data for 20 students they planned to consider for participation in the group. As I typically provide support for the lowest performing students in the school, I was not familiar with the academic abilities of the children on the list. I listened while teachers discussed the data, their observations of the students, and the best combination of children for the group. During this time I made notes and asked teachers questions to clarify the students’ needs so that I could understand why the teachers felt a child was a good fit for the group. The final group consisted of eight students.

Once the logistical decisions about the group were made I spent time reviewing Dr. Rasinski’s work on fluency. Fluency is often a misunderstood area of reading due to the current “speed-reading” assessment measures such as D.I.B.E.L.S. and AIMSweb. It is actually the, “ability to develop control over surface-level text processing so that [the reader] can focus on understanding the deeper levels of meaning embedded in the text” (Rasinski, 2004). This includes reading rate, as well as, accuracy, automaticity, and prosody.

In the article, *Teaching Reading Fluency to Struggling Readers – Method, Materials, and Evidence*, the authors draw a connection between reading fluency and being fluent in other activities. They pose the idea that actors, musicians and athletes often use, “repetition of a particular line, skill, movement, or composition” (Rasinski, Homan, & Biggs 2008) to develop fluency of their craft. Therefore, it is suggested that for, “young and struggling readers at all ages, repeated readings seems to be an essential method for achieving fluency” (Rasinski et al., 2008). These repeated readings should be done under the guidance of a coach who will, “select
appropriate materials, model fluent reading, provide assistance while reading, evaluate progress within and between passages, give encouragement, and celebrate success” (Rasinski et al., 2008). The structure of songs, with repeating lines and a chorus, provides a natural repetition within the lyrics and repeated reading, or singing, of songs is something children do in real life with the radio and in music class.

Additionally, fluency instruction is typically done through oral reading. Rasinski et al. recommend using performance texts for lessons. “Poetry, songs and song lyrics, rhetoric, plays (usually in the form of readers theater scripts), and other texts…lend themselves most fittingly to fluency instruction” (2008). Rehearsing and performing songs and plays repeatedly is something students do willingly. They will strive to make their, “performance…as good as possible” (Rasinski et al., 2008). In fact, Rasinski et al. (2008) state that, “Singing lyrics to songs is a form of reading that is nearly ideal for fluency instruction.”

Students need to have many opportunities to hear and read text to develop fluency. Modeled, assisted, and expressive reading should all be included as a part of the lesson. According to Richard Allington, choral, echo, initial teacher modeled, and paired reading techniques are all methods proven to be effective in developing fluency (2001). Additionally, these techniques lead to, “improvement in decoding, reading rate, prosodic reading, and comprehension of passages that the reader has not previously seen” (Rasinski, 2004).

In a 2008 journal article Rasinski et al., propose The Fluency Development Lesson (FDL). This lesson structure provided a guide for the intervention lesson I conducted with the first grade students. Although a significant amount of time was devoted to listening to and rehearsing the song selections, a portion of the lesson was also used to address phonics and vocabulary development.
Analysis of Preliminary Data

The initial review of data revealed information about the students who would be participating in the intervention and the best practices for fluency instruction. I learned that all but one of the students were two D.R.A. levels below proficient. The other student demonstrated at grade level reading on the D.R.A., but the teacher advocated for him to join the group because his reading was choppy. The students participating in the group showed variance on the D.I.B.E.L.S. words-per-minute score. Teachers indicated that they believed this was due to the “slower” readers reading word-by-word, while those with higher scores were using some short phrases. A review of the fluency research reaffirmed the benefit of using song lyrics for the text of the lesson. It also allowed me to consider different methods for reading the text and provided a lesson structure to support the implementation of the lessons.

Description of Intervention – Accommodation - Strategies

The intervention lessons I conducted were based on The Fluency Development Lesson (FDL) proposed in the fluency research of Tim Rasinski (2008). The lesson followed a predictable sequence and included many of the elements of the FDL. The lesson plan I used followed the structure listed below.

1. **Rereading** - Students reread (rehearsed) previously read songs. Children were allowed to buddy read or read individually. Student seating was arranged so that the more proficient readers would be buddies with those experiencing greater difficulty. This provided the children with an assisted reading opportunity. Also, during this portion of the lesson I listened to children read the self-selected songs and provided formative feedback. I took this opportunity to discuss with children which songs were their favorites and to learn why. This often promoted deeper comprehension of the selection.

2. **Word Study – Part 1** – Using *Daily Word Ladders: Grades 1-2* (Rasinski, 2008) to develop phonics skills, the class would read clues to create a new word from a given word. Students use context and phonic clues to solve the challenges. Children encouraged each other to get the correct answer and celebrated their success.

3. **Introduce the Song** – The teacher would provide the students with some information about the songs meaning, posing a question (when possible) about the content that required the children to attend to the text to find the answer.
4. **Modeled Reading** – Using a recording of the selection or providing a teacher reading model, students followed along on their copy of the text while they listened to the song.

5. **Word Study – Part 2** – The group would discuss word patterns observed during reading, highlighting words, or parts of words, to assist with decoding.

6. **Choral or Echo Reading** – The group rehearsed the song together using different strategies. When the group’s reading was disjointed we also incorporated “character” reading such as: read like a turtle.

7. **Individual or Partner Reading** – Students rehearsed the new song. During this time, the teacher assisted children providing coaching and feedback.

8. **Wrap-up** - Students would share their thoughts about the song of the day, the strategies they used that helped them learn, and any mistakes they might have made that lead them to discover something about themselves as a reader.

**Description of Data Collected**

When developing the inquiry plan, I felt it was essential to collect qualitative and quantitative data to assess the impact song lyrics had on reading development. The qualitative data was important to evaluate the perception students and teachers had about the impact of reading song lyrics. I used student surveys and teacher interviews to gather this information. I also felt strongly that quantitative data had to be reviewed. In the spirit of, first do no harm, I had to be sure that the potential fun of using song lyrics did not disguise a lack of, or delay in, reading development. This data was collected using the D.R.A. and D.I.B.E.L.S. assessments. Along the way, I attempted to capture my own thoughts and perceptions through journaling and tried to gather data on student engagement by making video recordings of the lessons.

**What Happened?**

The fluency intervention began on February 24. The students were enthusiastic about being in the group and the reading of songs lyrics. They were particularly excited when they knew the song selected for the day. This, however, proved to be somewhat of a challenge. When the students were too familiar with the lyrics they often chose to recall them rather than read them. When this occurred, students were asked to read with a special voice, such as a turtle, to slow down their reading and allow them attend more closely to the text. It was also
challenging when children did not know the song selected. Several students in the group labored over decoding words, and the lack of repetition in some of the selections caused them to be too difficult for these children. On the occasions that I selected an overly challenging song I increased the number of choral and echo readings of the selection. I also allowed children to reread any song during the independent reading rather than expecting students to read the piece taught for the day.

During the intervention many students improved their ability to decode big words by using chunking strategies. As we studied the songs, students began noticing and using the rime (the common spelling pattern found in many rhyming words) to help them decode words within a selection. They also began to notice the spelling patterns in other songs and draw connections between the words. Another method of chunking the students had a chance to practice was using the base word and suffix. Students began looking for the –ed and –ing endings and to cover them up in order to reveal the base word. This is an area the students are continuing to develop their skills.

One of the most surprising discoveries for me was the level of student engagement. My sense was that the students were reading during the full independent reading time, about 15 minutes a day. However, as I was interacting with students during this time I couldn’t always see what each child was doing. I decided to video this portion of the lesson to determine if the engagement was as high as I thought. Although it was not a scientific study, I only videoed on three days and the size of my room did not allow me to include all of the students on the recording, I felt that it did validate my perception. In reviewing the clips, the only non-reading behaviors occurred when children were appealing for help with a word or when they were
selecting a song with a classmate for partner reading. This was a remarkable amount of time for at-risk first graders to continually be engaged with text.

Throughout the intervention I felt concern about the amount of supported reading, choral, echo, and partner, students were engaging in during the lesson. This year, for a district-required inquiry, I have been studying and implementing the lessons outlined in Jan Richardson’s book, *The Next Step in Guided Reading*. In her book, she recommends avoiding choral reading instruction because it prevents struggling readers from having the opportunity to problem solve challenging words. Having a number of students whose challenges with fluency were based on decoding and automatic word recall, I was concerned that the techniques I was implementing in these lessons might hinder the student’s development with word problem solving. I am wondering if perhaps the objective of the lesson should impact the teaching techniques used. This group’s focus has been fluency, and choral, echo, and partner reading have all been proven to impact the development of fluency. During other times in the day all of the students participate in leveled reading lesson that give them the opportunity to work on reading problem solving. Although this seems to make logical sense, focus on the objective, I continue to wonder if I should to be more focused on the needs of each child.

After seven weeks of implementation data were collected and reviewed to determine the impact of the intervention. The qualitative data indicated a positive impact. All of the students indicated that reading song lyrics helped them to read better. Interviews with the classroom teachers also reflected positive outcomes. Teachers reported that students were more confident in the classroom, participating in group discussions and completing independent work with far greater frequency than prior to the intervention. The quantitative data were also positive. Four of the seven students (one of the students moved during the intervention) met the March D.R.A.
goal, closing the achievement gap. The D.I.B.E.L.S. scores indicated that four children had made the expected growth with one of theses students meeting the benchmark and closing the achievement gap. Based on these data it is difficult to determine if reading song lyrics had a causal or casual impact on student achievement. It is possible that the small group instruction or amount of time reading may have influenced the outcome. Nevertheless, reading lyrics was highly motivating and engaging for students and the opportunity proved to have a positive impact on the student’s self-perception as readers and their achievement.

What I Have Learned

Success builds success. This was the mantra repeated over and over again during my undergraduate studies. The students I worked with during my inquiry felt successful reading song lyrics, they loved to learn new songs and to reread their favorites. The enjoyment they felt impacted their reading engagement and the amount of reading impacted their reading achievement. They viewed themselves as being successful readers and therefore they are becoming more successful readers.

I also believe the small group instruction, and the time I was able to give students individualized attention, impacted student achievement. One of the classroom teachers commented that there would be no way with a class with 30 children that she could give her students the same amount of attention during the day that I can give to them in 40 minutes. Relationships influence learning. The students in this group would chase me down in the hallway to ask if we would be meeting and they would dance and cheer when I would pick them up for group. Although this may have been an indicator of the students’ eagerness to read, I’m inclined to believe that it is perhaps a reflection of the fact that they had the few extra minutes of adult attention that made them feel a little extra special.
The final thing that I am reminded of by my involvement in this inquiry is that learning can be fun. Now, with the demands of the Common Core State Standards, and the pressures of teacher evaluation, and the desire to have student achievement scores that allow me to be considered for merit pay, I find myself more inclined to push children to achieve the objectives, and, at times, I lose sight of the, “learning is fun” idea. This inquiry helped me to remember the value of doing, or at least including, more “fun stuff” in my teaching. Song lyrics can be used as text for reading support at all grade levels and the right selection of songs can engage learners of all ages.

This inquiry project served as an important reminder for me about some critical elements of teaching and learning: teach in a way that allows all children to experience success, build positive relationships with students, and make learning fun. Maybe these are some of the reasons why people enjoy learning. In the future, if I start my planning with the “why” perhaps students will have an easier time learning the what.
References


