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# Reading in Rhythm: Using Music to Teach Literacy

BY MARLENE BRUNO



Have you ever stumbled upon a really good idea, put it together with some of your other really good ideas, and ultimately come up with one of the best teaching techniques you've ever discovered? That happened to me a few years ago when I stumbled upon a book titled *Piggyback Songs: New Songs Sung to the Tune of Childhood Favorites* compiled by Jean Warren (1983) which is available from Totline Press.

*Piggyback Songs* is a compilation of little verses written by teachers from all parts of the United States. The poems have to do with seasons, holidays, songs about school, and songs about kids. The poems have been put to simple melodies that most children come to school with an awareness of. Examples are *London Bridge is Falling Down*, *Row Row Row Your Boat* and other very traditional tunes. An example of one of the *Piggyback Songs* is the following:

## At My School

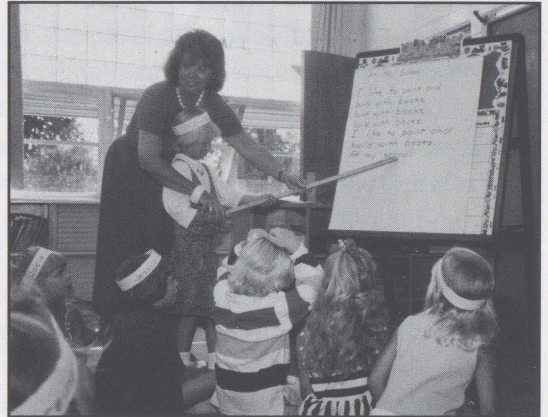
Sung to:

*"London Bridge is Falling Down"*

I like to paint and build with blocks,  
Build with blocks, build with blocks,  
I like to paint and build with blocks,  
At my school (p. 45).

Many teachers and researchers advocate using music as part of instruction (Atwell, 1987; Gardner, 1983; Routman, 1988; Routman, 1991). I decided to try to make better use of music to create

regular opportunities which would be comfortable for all students to experience language in print.



When I took the book *Piggyback Songs* to my classroom and started using it eight years ago, I decided I might try combining this book with a teaching technique I have been using successfully for years at 3rd through 6th grade levels. That technique is called the Neurological Impress Method (NIM). It was developed by R. G. Heckelman, a senior clinical psychologist at the Riverside General Hospital University Medical Center in Riverside, California. The Neurological Impress Method is a technique in which the instructor and the child read aloud together from the same text, with the teacher's voice directed at the right ear of the learner (thought to promote transfer to the left side of the brain) (Heckelman, 1986). A text is chosen that the child can read easily. The instructor may have to adjust his/her reading speed, slowing down to a more comfortable speed for the child. The lines or paragraphs are



reread several times until a fluid, normal reading pattern is established. While the text is being read together, one very important aspect is that the instructor runs his/her finger in a smooth continuous fashion under the words that are being spoken. The instructor should practice synchronizing his voice and finger with someone watching. Good readers tend to look ahead of where their voice is and it is absolutely essential that the finger—as a guide for the child's eyes—and the voice be synchronized when doing this activity. The text is repeated until the child is very comfortable reading the text at a comfortable pace, and is reading fluidly. Because this serves as a model for correct reading, children who have been unsuccessful readers have said, "I didn't know this is how you read." This particular technique, when repeated for 12 hours of instruction, can produce fluid oral reading and increased comprehension (Bruno, 1985; Heckelman, 1961). Many people have successfully adapted the method for particular instructional situations (Downs and Morin, 1990; Heckelman, 1986; Kahn, 1983; Kahn, 1984; Larking, 1988).

In my kindergarten classroom I took the Neurological Impress Method and applied it to the *Piggyback Songs*. I begin by teaching the children the traditional tune we are going to be using. We sing the traditional words to the traditional tune two or three times until the children feel comfortable with the tune. Then I teach the children the new words to the traditional tune. Again, we sing the new words to the traditional tune two or three times until I feel everyone is familiar with the new words. I choose songs that have lots of words repeated since I am planning this as an opportunity to teach reading at the kindergarten level.

In front of the children, using a large easel chart, I write the words to the new song. Usually the children are able to tell me what words to write next because I say the words aloud as I write. I have chosen songs that are very repetitive, and we have sung the song until the children remember the words. I do not worry about my printing being perfect. I simply get the words up on the chart as quickly as possible.

The next step is done over a period of a week. In my kindergarten classroom I have one child who is designated the **leader** everyday. The leader comes to the front of the room and is handed a yardstick, or a chalkboard pointer. The leader and I stand to the left of the chart so we are not blocking the view of any of the other children in the class. With me covering the leader's hands in my hands we point to the words being sung by the entire class. Because I have the leader's hands in my hands, I am the one who is controlling the movement of the pointer, but the child is having an opportunity to be in front of the class. We sing the entire song and the leader gets to choose another child to come up. The whole process is repeated twice more: with my hands over the child's hands, we point to the words that are being sung by the entire class. Remember that the pointer must go in a **smooth, continuous** fashion and must coincide with the word being sung at that precise moment. In order to do this you will probably have to slow the tempo of the song as it is very difficult to move the child's arms and cross a chart paper from left to right if you keep the tempo of the song at normal speed. The class begins to develop a sense that they need to pause slightly so that the pointer can return to the left side of the chart paper, and they allow for that in their singing.



The entire process I have just described will take about 10 minutes. This is done once a week because I use one song for at least a week, and sometimes longer. Each day, the rest of the week, it is not necessary to teach a new tune or new words, so all I do is call three children to come up to the chart and point to the words in a neurological impress fashion while the rest of the group sings. This process takes perhaps three minutes a day.

My job, in addition to assisting the child with the pointer, is to remind other children, who are perhaps distracted, that they need to look at the chart paper where we are pointing. I do not single out children by name as I want this to be an enjoyable activity. The children who are ready for this type of reading instruction are very focused on the words: those that are not ready and are not focused on the words are still able to enjoy participating in the singing and pointing. By doing this as a whole group activity for two or three minutes each day, all of the children enjoy the activity because they are singing, and children love to sing. They vie to be the person chosen to come up front. After the children have pointed to the words for a few days, I ask if there is anyone who recognizes a word and can come up and point to it. In the beginning of the week, very few of the kindergartners volunteer to come up and point to a word, but after the song has been sung 4 or 5 days, most of the children in the class know at least one word on the chart. As the year progresses, I find that the word identification activity can be done on the day the song is introduced because the children develop confidence in their ability to recognize many words.

Identifying a word involves more than just standing up and pointing to a

word. I use hot colored paper that I have cut into three different sized brackets. The brackets are large, medium, and small and have three sides. The child chooses the size bracket he/she wants. The child places the bracket so that it underlines and encompasses the word he/she has chosen. I do this so that the children sitting on the floor realize what a word is, that it is a group of letters put together and not necessarily just one letter that the "pointer's" finger is pointing to. Some of the children will come to school knowing that a word is perhaps several letters put together, but many children do not have the concept of word.

The children will bracket the longer, more difficult words, words that have meaning like *Christmas* or *Halloween*. It will be long into the school year before they start isolating common words like *would*, *could*, *will*, *they*, etc. Words like *the* and *they* the children will begin to isolate by late fall. By the end of the year I find that the class, as a group, can isolate every word in the song. By spring, I challenge the "pointer" to choose a word that has not been chosen that day.

I have described how I use a book to give me the ideas for words for new songs. Each of the songs in *Piggyback Songs* is written by a classroom teacher, so why not you too? Occasionally something special happens in my classroom which causes the children to ask to write a new song and put it to a familiar melody. When I teach letters, colors, or numbers, the children will compose their own songs. Putting new information to rhythm and music facilitates learning. Here are some examples composed by my kindergartners:



### Mr. "H"

Sung to the tune of:

*"Here We Go Round the Mulberry Bush"*

Mr. "H" has horrible hair,  
Horrible hair, horrible hair.  
Mr. "H" has horrible hair,  
It is long and green.

### COLORS

Sung to the tune of:

*"The Farmer in the Dell"*

R E D spells red,  
R E D spells red,  
R >>>>>E>>>>>D  
R E D spells red.

The children composed several verses to "Colors," one for each color word we were learning to recognize.

There are some other uses of this technique. After we complete our week or two using a song, I write the words on paper and construct a little book with a cover. I make several copies, and the children can take the songs home and sing them to or with their families.

At my open house in the fall and at parent teacher conferences, I discuss with the parents the neurological impress method and give some instruction in the technique so that when the children take the songs home, the parents know the importance of running their fingers simultaneously under the word being sung.

At playtime or quiet book time, four or five children take copies of the song and will sit in a small group and sing the song. They are pointing to the words and discussing which words are which. It is exciting to watch them discussing language together. I have involved the children in a tactile way and in a rhythmic way, but also have involved the parents in helping their children learn to read.

This technique has been very successful for me. I don't have any formal research to show the success of this technique, but every year one-half to three-fourths of my kindergarten class is reading by June. While this is not the only language activity that takes place, I feel this particular activity helps the children grasp the concept of word, and of sentence. When I am writing on the chart paper, I explain that a dot at the end of a complete thought is a period; or when we use a question mark or an exclamation point, I very briefly explain why the mark is there. As this is done daily throughout the year, the children will say to me, "That's a question—it needs a question mark"; or "That's said with a lot of strong feeling—don't you think we need an exclamation point?" The children begin to apply the use of grammatical markings. We talk about apostrophes and commas, too. I ask them why I use capital letters. They respond that each new sentence, names, and special holidays have capital letters at the beginning of them.

Just the fact that we are talking about language is important. I hear from parents that when the little booklets go home, the children will repeat to parents what I have instructed in the classroom, so I know there is learning taking place. For me, it is exciting when the children can tell me what markings need to be written on the chart because they are initiating and applying writing skills. During the entire school year we do about twenty songs. It is difficult to complete one a week because of other activities in the classroom. If a song is lacking in repetition or has several new words, I may purposely spend two weeks on that song, as long as the children are still interested. What I usually find is that the children

*Continued on p. 19*



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*“No oil*

*to read by...*

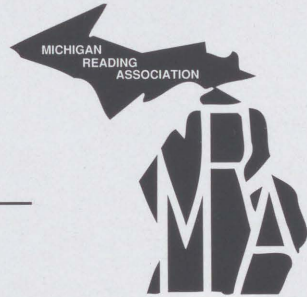
*I am off to bed.*

*But Ah!*

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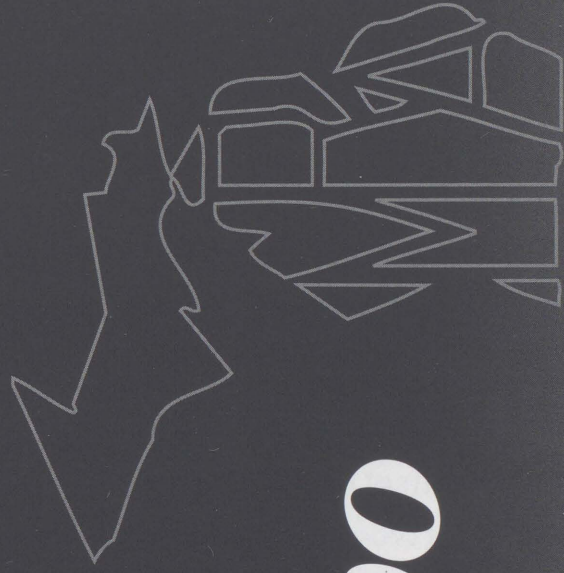


*But Ah!*

*my moonlit*

*pillow.”*

*~Basho*



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become more interested as they begin to recognize more words; you've heard the saying, "Success breeds success."

I feel that this 3 or 4 minute activity done on a daily basis makes a difference not only in the children's ability to read but also in their attitudes about reading. It is something that is fun, and it is done as a group so there isn't any pressure on individual children to perform. The key to the success of this technique is putting words to music. Whenever the children hear songs, raps, or jump rope jingles, they remember the words put to rhythm. Adults, as advertisers well know, remember long passages easier if put to music. Another way to use this technique is to ask the parents if there are any ethnic or cultural songs that they like to sing as a family, or perhaps just family favorites that they would like to share with the entire class. Ask if parents would come to the classroom and assist in teaching the song to the class on the day it is introduced.

Combining the neurological impress method and music is a very effective way to catch and keep children's interest. This technique, when used daily for only 3 or 4 minutes, is one effective way to teach children to read. I enjoy using this activity because it does not force children to read. There is no pressure put on the children. Those that are ready to learn to read, learn. Those who are not ready to learn to read, enjoy the music. I have suggested one music book and a few optional ways to use this technique. Each time I present this as a talk to a

group of teachers, someone suggests another component to add to my idea; I invite others to adapt this versatile technique which can be used at many grade levels.

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