

October 1992

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Recommended Citation

Schippers, Tiyi (1992) "Fostering Literacy in an Early Childhood Classroom Through Songwriting,"
Michigan Reading Journal: Vol. 26: Iss. 1, Article 5.
Available at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/mrj/vol26/iss1/5>

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Fostering Literacy in an Early Childhood Classroom Through Songwriting



BY **TIYI SCHIPPERS**

Using a young child's natural creativity and insatiable need for expression is an effective and fun way to promote literacy in an early childhood classroom. In my second grade classroom at St. Ann School in Cadillac, this is evident through the integration of the arts in the daily curriculum. Children are encouraged to express their feelings through a variety of media, one of which is music.

Part of the second grade science curriculum is exploration of sound, and since some of my favorite sounds are music, this became the natural focus. We developed a well-stocked music center with an electronic keyboard (don't forget the headphones if you want to maintain your sanity), several muted xylophones, rhythm instruments, and other small stringed instruments, as well as books of songs and books about making instruments.

The children have time to write their own songs and experiment with melodies which they can tape or record using a simple numerical tablature for others to enjoy. We have also written songs as a class. Here is a story of how one such song was created.

Our playground consists of an asphalt parking area and a large sand lot. One recess when Alan, a first grader, was running to line up after the bell, he tripped and did a running slide across the sandy asphalt—skinning both knees badly. He came in limping and gritting his teeth,

with both knees bleeding, sand and small stones still stuck in the wound. As he came to the door, I saw that he wasn't even crying. I winced and asked if I could help. "That's OK, Ms. Tiyi," he replied, "I'll just go to the office for some band-aids and a hug." As he continued limping down the hall, I thought to myself, "That's one tough kid." He got cleaned up and returned bearing the proud medals of two huge patch bandages on his knees.

The following day Alan again came in from recess. This time, however, he moved slowly, shoulders slumped, and head down with his lower lip trembling, and big wet tears leaving muddy streaks on his dusty face. "Oh, honey," I said as I put my arm around him, knowing that this time he must have been really hurt, "What happened? Did you fall on those sore knees again?"

"No," he sobbed, "I was out on the swings and some kids called me STUPID."

Ian, who was listening, put his arm around Alan's shoulders, comforting him and in true friend fashion said, "Oh, don't listen to them...sticks and stones can break your bones but names can never hurt you!"

"Hold the phone!" I said; "Time out! That's a lie!" I went on as the rest of the class gathered around, "Yesterday, Alan got all scraped up...he even had stones stuck in his body and he didn't even cry!

Today, somebody said some mean words and look at him. He looks a lot more hurt today than he did yesterday!"

"That's right!" another child said.

"We should change that; words hurt your feelings."

We all sat down on the rug, the group surrounding Alan, patting his back and comforting him. I took out my dulcimer and said, "When things like this really bug me, I write a song. Let's write a song right now to change that rhyme."

Enthusiasm built as ideas poured out from the gallery. I jotted them down as fast as I could and then said, "Wait! Let's start with a catchy refrain. If sticks and stones can break your bones, what can words break?"

"Your heart!" came the instant reply. "Words can break your heart!"


Finding a simple melody on the dulcimer, I began to sing. Soon everyone joined in singing the refrain of the newly created song. Then the real work began. We tried to rhyme where we could and mostly settled for "close enough for folk music." I added my own closing verse and the song grew into one of the most requested songs at our school's Friday sing-alongs as well as at concerts by my band, Lake Effect.

The whole episode lasted about 45 minutes and while it's true that I had to scrap my planned language arts lesson

that day with the dreaded Circle-In-My-Lesson-Book-Indicating-That-We-Didn't-Get-To-That, the result of the spontaneous lesson was a lasting song, and the feeling of accomplishment and capability that only too rarely happens in school.

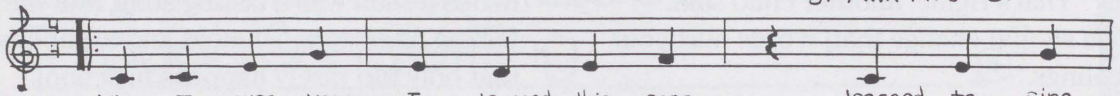
Since then many songs have followed. When I write a new song, I always share it with my kids. They, too, have written songs. New scraps of paper about puppies and springtime and friends or family continue to appear at the keyboard. The best reward came the first time I saw written in the language box on a child's center contract, "song riteing."

You don't have to be a trained musician to write songs with your kids. You don't even need to play an instrument. Try taking a familiar melody like the "ABC" song and put your own words to it. And although RAP music has gotten (pardon me!) a "bum rap," it is an excellent vehicle for expressive language. Even a kindergartner can make the rhythmic sound effects to accompany a rap, and your kids will reach new levels of excitement as they make music another form of self-expression on the road to literacy.

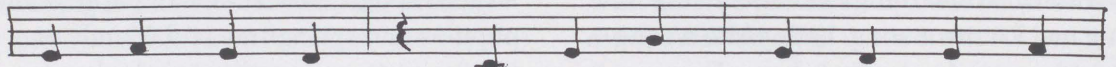
Ms. Tiyi Schippers presently teaches 2nd Grade at St. Ann School in Cadillac, MI. She serves as President-elect of the Wexaukola Reading Council. 

Sticks And Stones

Tyri Schippers &
St. Ann First Grade 1991



1. When I was young I learned this song, learned to sing
2. Those un kind words you say to me hurt me where
3. Dime and stupid hurt me so make me think
4. So choose your words so carefull y fill them with



it all day long. Now I know that it was wrong
you can not see. Make me think I'll never be
my brain can't grow Make me think I'll never know
your love for me. Make it clear I'm already



it said words can never hurt me, words can never
good enough god enough to
e nough to make me smart- enough to make me
,good enough to love - good enough to

Refrain

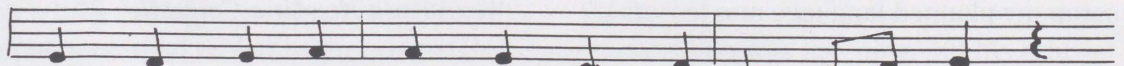


hurt.
love.
smart.
love!

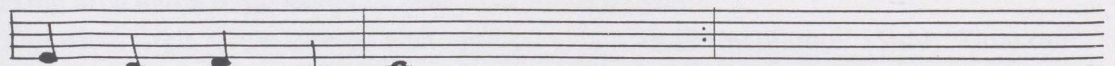
But sticks and stones can break your bones,



sticks and stones can break your bones, sticks and stones



can break your bones but words can break your heart -



words can break your heart.