

***Together in Song:
Building Literacy Relationships with Song-based Picture Books***

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Abstract

This action research study provided a collaborative social space in which to examine the intersection of shared singing/reading, emergent literacy, and family literacy. In particular, the significance of home literacy engagement with song-based picture books was investigated through the core action of a non-deficit, school-based family literacy program. Data were collected via parent/guardian journals that documented intergenerational home literacy engagement over a two-month period. Findings revealed that shared singing/reading with song-based picture books provided rich opportunities for families to build joyful, literacy relationships while providing kindergarten-aged children with meaningful experiences with text.

“I am now more up for bedtime story time when the flow of the music sort of gets you going and there is less chance to ‘act’ enthusiastic because you actually feel more enthusiastic” (PG16: Journal entry).

A child’s journey through the emergent literacy process includes real-life engagement with oral language and print. As Dyson (2001) suggested, this process unfolds like “a (post) modern novel, actualized through children’s play with, and organization of, their everyday textual stuff” (p. 35). Many literacy experts regard parents as central players in this process, serving as caring text partners who can create “the possibility for knowing, interpreting and imagining, all of which are critical to the comprehension of text” (Lysaker, Tonge, Gauson & Miller, 2011, p. 528). This relational aspect of literacy is viewed as an integral part of the sociocultural perspective on literacy acquisition (Vygotsky, 1978) and highlights the importance of active meaning making with significant others during early childhood (Vandermaas-Peeler, Nelson, Bumpass & Sassine, 2009).

Shared picture book reading is often cited as one opportunity for families to share meaning-making surrounding oral language and text. The recommendation by Saracho and Spodek (2010) that “children need to be provided with the opportunity to get lost in a good book” (p. 1) speaks to the importance of the aesthetic experience associated with this kind of family literacy. Although some research has indicated that only 8% of the overall variance in literacy achievement can be accounted for by such activities (Scarborough & Dobrich, 1994), others have noted shared reading is valuable for supporting the journey towards print knowledge (Sénéchal, Pagan, Lever & Oullette, 2011), oral vocabulary development (Britto & Brooks-Gunn, 2001) and reading comprehension (Mol & Bus,

2011). Sonnenschein and Munsterman (2000) placed focus on the highly social nature of shared reading suggesting that the affective quality of this experience may be just as important for a child's motivation to read as the actual literacy behaviours that are developed. Indeed, if sharing the intentions of significant others leads to valuing the artefacts and activities of these *others* (Tomasello, Carpenter, Call, Behne, & Moll, 2005), it seems likely that a positive shared reading experience between parent and child could support a growth in understanding about the value of text. Add to this the potential of situating family shared reading within the context of the significance of play (Roskos & Christie, 2001), and the opportunity for this relationally-based activity to gain strength in its ability to support a child's motivation greatly increases.

The Role of Singing

Song-based picture books, whose story-texts are built upon the lyrics of favourite children's songs, are a musical genre of picture books considered valuable for their potential in supporting focused engagement and playful paired singing/reading between parent/caregiver and child (Montgomery, 2012). As O'Herron and Siebenaler (2007) have suggested, singing a text rather than speaking it, may help a child naturally engage with the various components of language through the kinaesthetic sensation of lengthening and sustaining phonological sounds on melodic pitch. Songs embedded as the *texts* of song-based picture books are frequently organized around the repetitive pattern of verse-and-refrain: a musical form that creates a natural structure of regular repetition of particular sections of text. Accordingly, shared family singing/reading emerging through engagement with such musical structures in song-based picture books can provide children with increased opportunity for repetition with authentic episodes of rhyming, alliteration, and onomatopoeia (Montgomery, 2013). Empirical studies examining the use of these books in the early childhood classroom have revealed that pre-school/kindergartner's engagement with this genre supported growth in important emergent behaviours such as oral language and vocabulary development (Cassiano, 1998; Fisher, 2001), phonological awareness (Montgomery, 1998), and the transition from reliance on aural memory to the attention to print (Porter-Reimer, 2006). We considered whether the melodic element of song-based picture books might also be significant in supporting phonological memory as Wallace (1994) had suggested:

The underlying notion is that the melody provides rich information about the features of the text as well as a direct connection between the components of melody and components of the text. These connections then are access points or cues to memory. (p. 1472)

Interestingly, research in this parallel topic of melodic memory research had revealed that individuals as young as kindergarten were able to use a familiar melody as a cue in recalling text (Peynircioğlu, Rabinovitz & Thompson, 2008; Rainey & Larsen, 2002; Wolfe & Hom, 1993).

Arts-related literacy resources and activities that encourage children to engage in

“representational, communicative, expressive, and social capacities that can stimulate new shifts in young children’s awareness, perception, and thought” (Phillips, Gorton, Pincotti, & Sachdev 2010, p. 114) may hold potential for families as they engage in supporting children’s meaningful connections with print. A substantial body of research has indicated the value of engaging preschool/kindergarten -aged children in specific musical activities (e.g., singing songs, clapping rhythms, etc.) as a springboard for the development of phonological awareness. In particular, this research has pointed to musical engagement as an excellent pedagogical partner for supporting growth in the following:

1. *rhyming* (Boulduc, 2009; Dege & Schwarzer, 2011; Herrera, Lorenzo, Fernandez-Smith, & Costa-Giomi, 2011; Montgomery, 1998)
2. *syllable segmentation* (Boulduc, 2009; Dege & Schwarzer, 2011; Gromko, 2005; Overy, 2003; Montgomery, 1998)
3. *onset/rime* (Herrera et al., 2011)
4. *blending* (Dege & Schwarzer, 2011)
5. *phonemic awareness* (Boulduc, 2009; Gromko, 2005; Overy, 2003; Montgomery, 1998).

Perhaps even more importantly for literacy research from the socio-cultural perspective is the theory that music has the ability to communicate social and affective information while creating a feeling of “being together in time” (Overy & Molnar-Szakacs, 2009, p. 499). This theory points towards the idea that singing books together might be ripe for also supporting the relational aspect of literacy acquisition in early childhood. We considered, then, whether singing song-based picture books might have the potential to provide a dual support for children’s emerging literacies by not only supporting growth in phonological awareness, but also by serving as an integral stimulus for encouraging a strong relational experience during shared picture book singing/reading within families.

The Role of the Kindergarten

The Kindergarten programme plays its own role in facilitating children’s engagement with text. This beginning school year can be significant as teachers endeavour to pedagogically support children’s emergence into school literacy practices through a variety of activities including shared reading. Lysaker (2006) suggested that helping students develop a personal self-efficacy and agency toward reading is critical during this time, as this development of the “self that reads” exerts an important influence on whether young children feel a continued sense of engagement with text (p. 53). Stemming from Bandura’s notion of self-efficacy (1997), or an “individual’s confidence in their ability to organize and execute a given course of action to solve a problem or accomplish a task” (p. 3), this idea suggested that children who believe they can be successful as readers may be more likely to engage in reading activities (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000). Taking this idea further, Gambrel and Gillis (2007) indicated that motivated *readers* are children who not only believe they are competent (i.e., self-efficacious), but also believe that text is valuable and feel pleasure in literacy activities. Therefore, positioning emergent literacy activities

within a relational, engaging interaction at the start of the kindergarten year seems critical for supporting children's on-going literacy development.

Empowering families to serve as school literacy partners could pay dividends as teachers look to develop meaningful literacy experiences with children early in the school year. Parent newsletters, book bags, and reading logs have been noted as some of the ways that kindergarten teachers have endeavoured to engage in supporting the school literacy curriculum (Hindman, Skibbe & Morrison, 2013). However, these kinds of home outreach initiatives often place the parent in the role of literacy *helper* rather than literacy *partner* and do little to tap into the intimate knowledge parents have about their child's literacy development (Crawford & Zygouris-Coe, 2006). Hosting family literacy workshops to empower families towards active literacy partnership with teachers is much less common in school settings even though these kinds of programmes in community-based projects have been found to be successful in supporting parents' growth in early literacy knowledge (Anderson, Anderson, Friedrich & Kim, 2010). A review of school-based programs in the U.S. and Canada determined there was evidence that teachers and families "can make meaningful connections to support early literacy development through school-based integrated services for culturally and linguistically diverse populations" (Pelletier, 2008, p. 43), especially when the programs were collaborative in nature (Powell, 2004). As Reese, Sparks, and Leyva (2010) suggested, parents may be an "untapped resource" (p. 114) that could hold a key to helping unlock their children's potential in early literacy.

Given the evidence that 4-5 year-old children's interaction with song-based picture books could provide support for growth towards phonological awareness, combined with the potential for such singing engagement within families to create a strong relational literacy experience with text for kindergarten-aged children, prompted us to consider how to examine this aspect of literacy development within an empirical study. As a result, we purposed our research to examine the intersection of shared reading/singing, emergent literacy, and family literacy. In particular, we were interested in developing a deeper understanding of engagement with song-based picture books in the home literacy environment and the role this engagement might play in supporting kindergarten-aged children's continued emergent literacy at the start of the school year. Our two research questions were:

1. What role can a collaborative, school-based family literacy program featuring song-based picture books play in supporting kindergarten-aged children's emergent literacy?
2. What role can song-based picture books play in engaging kindergarten-aged children in meaningful experiences with text?

Theoretical Framework

Our research situated itself within the sociocultural theory of Vygotsky (1978) and the social cognitive theory of Bandura (1977). Vygotsky's (1978) perspective emphasized the importance of the social aspect of learning including beliefs regarding the notion that knowledge is actively constructed and socially and contextually situated. He

maintained that interactions directly influence learning and asserted that, “*human learning presupposes a specific social nature*” [italics in original] (p. 88). This sociocultural perspective was integral to the relational nature of our research both from the viewpoint of the parents/guardians’ collaboration with other parents/guardians in a school-based family literacy setting and the kindergarten-aged children’s intergenerational literacy experiences at home through the shared singing/reading of song-based picture books.

Sociocultural theory also assisted us as we explored the ways that we might begin to reimagine our own knowledge about the intersection between singing and emergent literacy as we considered how to work side-by-side with the parents/guardians in a collaborative partnership. We intentionally centered our organization of the family literacy component of our research within the “decolonizing” work of Reyes and Torres (2007) that placed value on the “non-deficit” model of family literacy. This brought a “relational pedagogy that is based on a dialogical philosophy and participatory democracy” (p. 91) to the centre of our sociocultural inquiry processes and provided us with the freedom to potentially support transformation of knowledge by all participants in the research study.

Also informing our research was Bandura’s (1977) social cognitive theory and his notion of self-efficacy. Bandura (1997) claimed that, “Beliefs of personal efficacy constitute the key factor of human agency” (p. 3) and this relates to the power to make things happen. He also stated that, “Efficacy belief is a major basis of action” (p. 3). Coleman and Hildebrandt-Karraker (2003) maintained that self-efficacy of parents is related to “parents’ perceived ability to positively influence the behavior and development of their children” (p. 128). Peterson, Farmer, and Kashani (1990) indicated that parental self-efficacy is also associated with specific behaviours including efforts to educate themselves regarding parenting. Bandura (1995) argued that parents must have “faith in their own abilities . . . [and] a sense of competency” (p. 79) in their role as parents in order to optimize the quality of their parenting.

We noted that musical self-efficacy beliefs had been explored within various contexts including performance (McPherson & McCormick, 2006; Nielsen, 2004; Ritchie & Williamson, 2011), pre-service music teachers (Akbulut, 2006), and singing (Montgomery, 2008). Although we knew singing had been identified as a powerful form of communication between parents and babies (Trehub, Unyk & Trainor, 1993), previous research had also revealed that parental singing goes into a steep decline after children reach the age of two (Custodero, Britto, & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). Other research examining the musical self-efficacy of university undergraduate students had revealed that many of these pre-service teachers were reticent to sing and reported a low level of confidence regarding singing in spaces where others may overhear them (Montgomery, 2008). Whether the limited use of song-based picture books by parents and teachers observed in previous research (Montgomery & Smith, 2010) had been simply related to lack of knowledge about the potential benefits of this genre or more to an adult, negative self-efficacy regarding singing, posed an interesting dilemma. Our current research,

although not directly addressing this question, flirted around the margins while providing a collaborative space for potential exploration of self-efficacy and its musical constructs.

Research Design

We designed an action research study to address our two research questions that situated itself within the spirit of participatory human inquiry (Reason & Bradbury, 2001). Our design brought together “action and reflection in a participatory, democratic process” (p. 1) with an opportunity for forming a generative social space (Kemmis, 2001) for shared meaning making regarding singing and literacy. This research design was further framed by our strong beliefs regarding the power of reflective practice in adult learning (Yorks, 2005) and the significance of the collaborative model to potentially “engender mutual trust, respect, and ownership among partners” (Morin, 2000, p. 14).

Building upon the decolonizing family literacy work of Reyes and Torres (2007), we constructed a non-deficit model of school-based family literacy as the “core action” of our inquiry process. This collaborative action provided the framework within which to build our “communicative space” where we hoped to support the creation of shared knowledge and meaning making by all participants.

Throughout the study, parents/guardians were considered partners in all aspects of the research including planning for topics at each of the evening literacy sessions. They were trusted to contribute valuable and accurate sources of information regarding their children’s emergent literacy behaviours and were regarded as significant reporters and interpreters of their children’s engagement with text (Dickinson & DeTemple, 1998). We acknowledged their observations of their literacy successes within their existing cultural contexts and encouraged reflection of these through consideration of literacy ideas shared by other families. Our *contribution* to the conversation was new knowledge about using song-based picture books and the possibilities that might exist through “add[ing] to or build[ing] on” (Rodriquez-Brown, 2004, p. 220) to the families’ literacy ideas by including this type of shared experience in a home literacy environment. This role as part-time contributors and full-time facilitators placed us in that messy space of participant observers (Habermas, 1976), but provided us with the necessary freedom to actively engage in the collaborative processes of the learning community during the *action* part of the study (Cohran-Smith & Lytle, 1993).

Parent/Guardian Participants

All parents/guardians with children enrolled in one private school kindergarten (38 families) and one public school kindergarten (58 families) in a large, Western Canadian city were invited to participate in the action research. We chose to engage families from both of these school settings (i.e., private and public) in an attempt to learn more about singing and literacy practices within a broad spectrum of school communities. The two private school kindergarten classes were connected to a university lab school and serviced families from a diverse range of demographics across the city. The three kindergarten classes within the public elementary school were located in a typical, suburban, K-6 school that serviced families from lower-to-middle socio-economic status

living within the boundaries of the school area. Both schools included several English Language Learning (ELL) families with the public kindergarten serving a larger ELL population (35%). One of the classes at the public kindergarten was also designated as a French immersion site.

Initial information regarding the research was provided to kindergarten families at each school at the beginning of the school year, both through class visitations and evening Open Houses. Thirty-eight families, or 40% of the total kindergarten family population from both schools volunteered to participate in the action research (i.e., 17/38 – private Kindergarten; 21/58 – public Kindergarten). This included a commitment to take part in a pre-study, confidential, informal taped interview with one of the researchers to share open-ended information about current home literacy and singing practices. All of these pre-study conversations were scheduled two-weeks prior to the subsequent family literacy sessions and were transcribed and member-checked with each individual parent/guardian for accuracy.

Table 1 indicates a summary of the information provided to the researchers during these conversations. This table can be regarded as a framework through which to view the home literacy demographics of the 38 parent/guardian participants, thereby providing a descriptive context for reviewing the data and findings that emerged through the research process. Within these pre-study conversations, shared reading was revealed as a familiar concept to most of the parents/guardians (82%) especially as a home routine at bedtime. Not unexpectedly, the types of books shared and the amount of time spent varied widely among households, but 78% of the parents believed they knew which books were their children's favourites. Some parents/guardians spoke to other literacy activities they did at home including playing games with the alphabet (8%), helping children learn to write their name (26%), and pointing out environmental print (6%). Few parents/guardians knew what was meant by the terms emergent literacy (9%) or phonological awareness (4%), but 78% seemed quite comfortable in describing their personal observations of their children's interactions with text using non-technical language.

Interestingly, the genre of song-based picture books was unfamiliar to almost all of the parents/guardians (98%). When told what they were during the interviews, 6% of the parents/guardians mentioned that they remembered making up tunes to nursery rhyme books when their children were younger, but said they didn't do this much anymore as they felt their children were too old for such activities/books. Many of the parents/guardians (92%) revealed that they did not feel they were strong singers but said they did try and sometimes sing with their children for fun, or at holiday time, especially if they were supported with CD or DVD accompaniments. Several (23%) thought singing was for *fun* and wondered how singable books could have anything to do with literacy. Over half of the parents/guardians (56%) said they decided to volunteer for the study to learn about new ways to help their children learn to read as they wanted their children to be successful in school. Another 11% indicated they also hoped to improve their English and learn English children's songs as part of the family literacy sessions.

Table 1

Pre-study Home Literacy Demographics of 38 Participating Families as Reported by Parents/Guardians

Home Literacy Information	Percentage of Parents/Guardians
Engaged in shared reading at home (e.g. bedtime)	82%
Identified their child's 'favourite' book(s)	78%
Participated in other activities at home to support emergent literacy:	
Playing games with the alphabet	8%
Helping children learn to write their name	26%
Pointing out environmental print	6%
Described their child's current 'reading' status	78%
Defined the term <i>emergent literacy</i>	9%
Defined the term <i>phonological awareness</i>	4%
Defined or identified a <i>song-based picture book</i>	2%
Identified singing self-efficacy as strong	6%
Identified singing self-efficacy as poor	92%
Sang with their children along with CD/DVD	28%
Sang with their children without CD/DVD accompaniment (i.e., solo)	4%
Volunteered to participate in research for the following reasons:	
Wanted to learn new way to support child's reading	56%
Wondered what singing had to do with literacy	23%
Wanted to improve their English and learn English songs	11%

Research Process

The collaborative, school-based family literacy sessions that served as the core action within the research study were organized as four, bi-monthly, sixty-minute sessions scheduled in the evening at each of the two elementary schools during the months of October/November. The 38 participating parents/guardians were invited to bring any extended adult family members that wished to attend the sessions (e.g., grandparents) in hopes of creating a more intergenerational nature to the collaborative sessions. The kindergarten-aged children themselves were not officially included in the sessions although parents did sometimes come with children if childcare was difficult on a particular evening. The principal volunteered to attend each of the four sessions to act in the capacity of host, and one of the kindergarten teachers attended when s/he was unavailable.

All sessions were designed to provide a collaborative space for co-construction of knowledge regarding children's growth in emergent literacy behaviours through shared home-singing/reading with song-based picture storybooks. Meetings were informal and included conversational topics generated by both parents/guardians and researchers during the beginning and end of each meeting. Pedagogical information from both a musical and emergent literacy perspective was woven into each of the four sessions by the researchers and was presented in the context of our *sharing* portion within the ongoing collaborative process. Although our topics included concentration on emergent linguistic behaviours (e.g., oral language, phonological awareness, etc.), acknowledgement was given that literacy behaviours also included multi-modal forms of communication (including singing) involving different semiotic systems. A deliberate choice was made to spend little of our sharing time in discussing modalities such as movement (e.g., dancing) or gesture as we wanted to see if parents/guardians might observe and report any of these behaviours naturally (i.e., emerge through the data set) rather than by being orchestrated through our conversations or actions during the family literacy sessions. At no time did we suggest shared singing/reading of song-based picture books should be the only form of literacy practice at home and encouraged parents to brainstorm regarding when and how they might potentially utilize these resources within a home context.

Parents/guardians received three complimentary song-based picture books at each meeting to use with their children in their home environment during the study, and beyond. Books were selected based on age-appropriateness for singing and shared reading, and were all hardbound or paperback copies as no digital versions were available at the time of the study. After the list of song-based picture books was finalized, we noticed that few of these twelve books were located in either of the two school's libraries or within regular collections of picture books housed in the children's kindergarten classrooms (see list of books in Appendix).

Parents/guardians were asked to keep weekly written journals on their families' experiences with the song-based picture books as part of the continuous action/reflection cycle. All were provided with new, open-ended guiding questions at each of the four evening sessions and were encouraged to document their children's literacy behaviours and engagement with the song-based picture books at home on a daily basis. We traded completed and yet-to-be completed journals with the parents at each bi-monthly evening session which provided us with an ongoing opportunity to hear and engage with the written voices of the families between sessions.

As researchers, we also kept individual journals for purposes of collecting field notes of significant experiences throughout the inquiry process. We met regularly as a team to talk about the ongoing evening sessions and to engage in our own continuous action and reflection cycle about the data in the parents' journals. We revisited these conversations in a cyclical fashion both to make adjustments to the bi-monthly meetings as well as to share our evolving thoughts on the research process.

As a multiplicity of data sources were considered integral to the design of the study, a final, confidential interview and/or written-response via email took place with

each of the parents/guardians at the close of the research process. These responses served as an opportunity for deeper reflection by the participants upon the whole experience within the collaborative family literacy program. This then served as the final data source of three used within the study:

1. parent/guardian journals
2. researcher field notes
3. parent/guardian final written response/interview

Data Analysis

An iterative analytical approach guided our analysis of the data collected through these three data sources (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Recurring themes were identified through a process involving the ongoing review of data from the participant's journals, followed by the crosschecking of this information with field notes and the final participant written reflection/interview. The two researchers individually reviewed the raw data from each school in its entirety first and then came together to sift through notes looking for points of convergence and divergence. We discovered data from both schools were quite similar in terms of several emerging themes and thus collapsed both piles into one data pool. We then returned to individual review of the combined raw data, coding for the themes identified during the first round of analysis in relation to the two research questions. We finally met together several times until we were successful at negotiating a shared interpretation of this data as a whole. The researchers' subjectivity and reflexivity were considered throughout the entire analysis process.

Findings

The results from the data analysis are presented in relation to the two research questions and their emerging themes. Two themes developed in regards to research question one while five themes emerged through the lens of research question two. Parent/guardian voices are featured here to highlight the power of observation and documentation in the research process and to illustrate the significance of the thematic analysis. All names have been removed from the data quotes and are identified by a randomly assigned numerical value (e.g., PG23 means Parent/guardian number 23).

Question One: What Role Can a Collaborative, School-based Family Literacy Program Featuring Song-based Picture Books Play in Supporting Kindergarten-aged Children's Emergent Literacy?

Theme one: The value of the collaborative process. Data revealed that many parents/guardians considered that the collaborative environment of the school-based family literacy sessions created a safe space in which to build a shared understanding of singing and emergent literacy, while forging connections with other families from their child's kindergarten class. As one parent wrote,

I enjoyed connecting with other parents and singing together . . . that isn't something that I would do on my own . . . that's something that was unique about the group experience . . . getting to connect with people in a different way. (PG12: Final written reflection)

Other journal entries such as, "This program is perfect for us . . . we have a chance to learn . . . I just heard the other parents sing and I tried to catch up" (PG22: Journal entry), spoke further to the value of learning together within this kind of supportive environment.

Group discussions were indicated as providing opportunity for sharing among community members, thereby offering parents/guardians support for making deep reflections on changes taking place at home:

Being involved in the parent discussion has really helped to give me a clear reminder of the ways to utilize music in the home and encourage children to enjoy music in a variety of ways. I liked hearing what the other parents said and as a result, I think I am singing more often with my children and encouraging them more and they are singing/reading more often. (PG24: Final reflection)

This group experience was also considered a supportive framework through which parents/guardians could rely upon each other for encouragement regarding home literacy engagement. As one parent revealed,

I registered into your programme knowing that this would be the only way to commit myself to reading/singing with my kids. The group part works very well to motivate me. It is as if I made a promise to a dear friend and I don't want to let her down...and what tired Mommie doesn't need a bit of inspiration. (PG23: Journal entry)

This kind of motivation was considered integral for regular attendance at the evening sessions as several parents/guardians felt like they "were with other interested families" (PG12: Journal entry). "It's always fun to come together with other parents...and I loved what I got out of it" (PG14: Journal entry) stated another parent, highlighting the appreciation felt by many of the participants for the opportunity to share meaning making with other kindergarten families at their child's school.

Theme two: Growth in parent self-efficacy for supporting emergent literacy behaviours through shared singing/reading. Data revealed an emerging growth in self-efficacy by the parents/guardians towards supporting their children's development of literacies through musical text. These adult family members felt empowered by their growing understanding of the role that the song-based picture books could play in supporting an engaging and meaningful reading experience and indicated their excitement for the new opportunities created at home. As one parent wrote,

I loved being able to go home, because as the weeks went by, my son started to anticipate that I would be coming home [after an evening session] with a book . . . getting to go home and share with him what I just learned . . . that was a great experience . . . it wasn't like I was just bringing the book home, I was bringing this extra knowledge home about the book and there were things I could do with him and that was such a great feeling to be able to do that. (PG6: Final reflection)

Another journal comment indicated,

The interesting thing is how it affects the parents...it had a big impact on me, I know it had an impact on my kids too but I almost wonder if it was like, it impacted me, it was a lesson to me, and I just influenced my children because of my behavioural change. (PG23: Journal entry)

This growth in confidence at observing and responding to their child's engagement with the song-based picture books led to more intentional literacy scaffolding by the parents/guardians in their home literacy environment. As one comment revealed, "Having this literacy program has made me more conscientious about how we spend our time. I find we are singing/reading more than just at bedtime" (PG5: Journal entry). Another stated,

We made hand gestures on our legs of the sounds, 'Zzzt, Zzzt, Zzzt' for the sawing motion. . . . We also sang the book in patterns where I chose to deliberately sing one pattern of the song and she sings another part and we switch and change it up each time...I hadn't done this before and it really helped. (PG18: Journal entry)

Intentional scaffolding included a growing confidence in how to choose books for future shared reading:

My surprise was that my son did like these stories. We had moved on from picture books probably a year or two ago. We had moved to more introductory chapter books (me reading to him) but now realize that our son still really likes picture books...and now we are singing/reading [song-based picture] books together and find he is enjoying reading again. What a treat! (PG36: Final reflection)

This confidence also involved an increase in knowledge of local literacy culture by several of the ELL parents/guardians. This in turn, served as a springboard to increase parent/guardian musical self-efficacy by providing support for their ability to be a stronger literacy partner in English:

This program is really good not only for the children, also good for us. As a parent not grew up here [Canada], we also learned a lot of child songs from this

program. Most of the songs you introduced are first time for us too. So we felt that we were more involved in the child education from the culture here. (PG8: Final reflection)

A further comment in this direction included,

We learned a lot of songs [English] that we didn't know. Actually, many children in Korea learn English by singing English songs there. Now I understand why they choose songs because while children sing English songs it feels like playing, not learning. (P33: Final reflection)

Question Two: What Role Can Song-based Picture Books Play in Engaging Kindergarten-aged Children in Meaningful Experiences with Text?

Theme one: Strengthening relationships. Data revealed the compelling power that sharing musical text had for reinforcing the natural bonds between the participating parents/guardians and their kindergarten-aged child. As one parent noted, "We read together all the time so that wasn't a new experience [before the program], but with the music he cuddled a little closer, and stayed put a little longer" (PG9: Final reflection). Another comment illustrated this finding well:

I want the day to end on a happy note and a cozy good night reading does that and the song-based picture books automatically did that since we were singing happily, looking forward to it, the songs are upbeat and funny and she was humming as she went to sleep. Very positive for both parent and child. (PG19: Journal entry)

This discovery of the power of daily, shared singing/reading to reinforce parent-child bonding revealed how singing together is a powerful emotional experience:

I sincerely say that these [song-based picture books] slowed me down in a good sense . . . I knew I was responsible for exposing my child to reading and listening to stories. But I was doing all this in a rush without laughter and often asked her (and my two other kids) to be quiet and not to interrupt my reading . . . The music that goes with the words/books awoke me to the beauty and strong bond and binds me with my beautiful children. (PG6: Final reflection)

Data also revealed the power that the participant's home engagement with song-based picture books had in creating new opportunities for shared family literacy across several ages of siblings. As one parent stated, "My five-year-old loves to try to sing the books (all of them) to his two-year-old sister. She then *reads* them to me" (PG4: Journal entry). Another parent/guardian stated,

My daughter asked, after having the book read to her several times, if she could *read* it to me and her [younger] brother. She then read it perfectly [*Cows in the Kitchen*]. My younger son surprised me with how easily he filled in the words – even numbers in *Knick Knack*. The kids enjoyed the books being read to them together many times and didn't seem to tire of them. (PG37: Journal entry)

Participating in the activity of singing together through the song-based picture books seemed appealing even to older brother and sisters: “I really enjoyed that my older son usually wanted to participate. He just dove right in and didn't think they were babyish at all! He was excited” (PG2: Final reflection). This was indicated as unusual by many parents who said they normally did bedtime reading separately with each of their children as the books appealing to their older child (e.g., eight-year old) was not at all attractive to their kindergartener (e.g., five-year old), or to their youngest child (e.g., two-year old). Indeed, parents/guardians returning home after one of the evening family literacy sessions often found all of their children eagerly awaiting their arrival with anticipation of another opportunity for a shared family literacy experience through singing the song-based picture books:

Our whole family sits together on the bed before they went to sleep and sang the books together. It was fantastic and it was such a wonderful end to the day. They were all anticipating me coming home [from the literacy sessions] so they stayed up a little later than usual just to see the books. (PG21: Journal entry)

Theme two: Joyful engagement with the song-based picture books for parents/guardians. This newfound joy for shared singing/reading, as discovered by many of the parents/guardians, propelled them to commit to spending even more time than usual on shared home reading. As the data revealed,

My son loved [the book] *Cows in the Kitchen* very much. . . . It seemed simpler than any of the other books [he already has] but he really loved it. He moves his head right up to mine and we sing it in silly operatic fashion. I loved it and didn't want to stop! (PG32: Journal entry)

A further parent/guardian revealed,

[My son] gave me puppy dog eyes until I agreed to read *Old MacDonald Had a Woodshop*. He climbed right up into my lap for this one. He sang Old MacDonald had a cow verse with his little brother spontaneously as we got comfy. . . . The boys loved it and my oldest son sang along all the onomatopoeia words once he learned them. At the end, he sang ‘E-I-E-I-O, I love Mommy’ . . . Great time! Worth being late for bed. (PG11: Journal Entry)

This “declaration of excitement was echoed by many parents/guardians at the meeting, almost as though they were surprised to discover how much they enjoyed the shared singing/reading experience” (Researcher field notes). As written by one parent/guardian,

I learnt from the picture book project not to rush the singing/reading with my child. It has become a tremendously enjoyable experience singing with my daughter. She longs for the singing time and hugs me so often as if she wants to thank me, to reward me for time spent with her. I will never forget what joyous and happy moments you have helped me experience while reading and singing with my kids. (PG15: Journal entry)

Theme three: Joyful engagement with the song-based picture books for the kindergarten-aged children. Data revealed that a joyful learning experience was also created for the kindergarten-aged children while they engaged with the lyrical text of the song-based picture books. This meaningful rendezvous with print seemed to create a powerful magnetic force for the children to want to spend more time with the books than had been previously experienced in households. One parent/guardian explains this when they state,

My son loved *The Seals on the Bus*. Once he realized that anybody and everybody could ride the bus – the bus was mighty full! He made up his own verses and sang and added appropriate sounds for each new passenger on the bus. I found him singing the book by himself on several occasions. He and his sister (who is three years old) also made up some very silly, non-relevant words to the song...and they loved spending time in this way. (PG7: Journal entry)

Another parent’s comment revealed how her kindergarten-aged child redirected a regular home activity to include more time on shared singing/reading of the books:

I was really surprised one day, when the kids had asked to watch television, so I was in the process of turning it on when my two-year old brought over a bunch of the books from the program [song-based picture books]. So I started singing/reading to her, while the TV was on for my five-year old. After a while, he asked me to mute the TV because the books were more exciting. We ended up singing/reading for an hour that afternoon which we rarely do. We had a great time choosing the books that we were going to sing next...deciding who was going to sing what parts, etc. (PG11: Journal entry)

Additional data spoke to how children’s joy with the shared singing/reading experience was indicated when their child carried the song-based picture books into non-traditional home spaces for further engagement. As shared by one parent, “He started bringing the books into the car. The whole family sang together. Then my son sang on his own while turning the pages at the right time” (PG22: Journal entry). Another stated,

“I’ve noticed the kids singing the stories’ ‘songs’ in their everyday playing – these tunes seem to creep their way into everyday life” (PG34: Journal entry). This unique ability to move the text of the book away from the print (i.e., tune & lyrics) while *rehearsing* in another playful context (i.e., singing the song while playing blocks), prompted one parent/guardian to observe how, “their memory for the lyrics always astonishes me” (PG14: Journal entry).

Theme four: Playful engagement with text. Parents’/guardians’ multiple observations of their children’s playful interactions with the musical text gave agency to the role of singing in creating meaningful opportunities for phonological engagement. Several parents noted this kind of improvisational behaviour with the phonology of language including this journal comment, “The entire family sang the books before going to bed. My son likes to sing the songs and mix up the animal sounds like ‘Moo, shoo, too’. It was really fun” (PG3: Journal entry). Further parent data revealed,

“He [my son] loved the way he could manipulate the words and play around with his own lyrics. He and his brother made some funny verses and every once in a while, I would catch them singing them and laughing at how funny they thought they were.” (PG26: Final reflection)

Another participant indicated,

My daughter enjoyed the animal sounds in *Cows in the Kitchen*. Almost as much, she would ask me to sing *Cows in the Kitchen* and then she would sing the ‘moo, moo, moo’ part. Then she would sing ‘cows in the kitchen’ and I would sing ‘moo, moo, moo’.... when her turn was to sing ‘shoo, shoo, shoo’ there would be so much expression on her face! As if she indeed chased the animals away. (PG29: Journal entry)

Many parents reported their kindergarten-aged children loved to improvise new text to make the shared singing/reading experience last longer:

Tonight she chose *The Seals on the Bus*. When we finished reading the book, I suggested, ‘who rides the bus next?’ and she sang to me, ‘Mary [pseudonym] on the bus goes thank you, thank you, thank you.’ Then she chose ‘Mommy’ and I sang, ‘la, la, la.’ Next she made up and sang, ‘Daddy and E-I-E-I-O’; ‘dog and bark, bark, bark’; ‘clock and tick, tock, tick’; ‘bed and bump, bump, bump, etc.’ Then we laughed. (PG17: Final reflection)

Data also revealed children chose to add improvisatory movement and dancing to their shared singing/ reading experiences with the song-based picture books. As indicated by this parent journal, “*Old MacDonal*d – My son sang with me the whole time. He loved

the ‘ouch’ part with the hammer. He pretended to have the tools in his hand and made actions without prompting from me” (PG16: Journal entry).

Theme five: The power of melody. Data revealed that the kindergarten-aged children used the familiarity of the melodies in the song-based picture books as a type of scaffold to help them move forward through new words in the song-based picture books. As one parent revealed,

Today, my daughter heard the song *The Wheels on the Bus* on TV and she ran to get her *Seals on the Bus* [song-based picture book version]. She then carried on with the tune while singing the new words in the *seals* version (PG32: Journal entry).

Another journal indicated,

These books are great in introducing the familiar sounds that my son is aware of into sight words that he can confidently read. Even though he is not exactly reading word by word, he is able to guess the next word correctly because the tune keeps going forward. (PG38: Journal entry)

This powerful flow of the melody to propel children forward when singing was reported by participants as integral to an increase in children’s confidence in reading:

My daughter can quickly follow the words while singing a song-based picture book; her reading confidence in general has improved and she is more willing to go with the flow of a singing sentence than to get stuck on a word. (PG16: Final reflection)

Data revealed the surprise of many parents regarding the value of using the *preschool-like* song melodies (e.g., “Itsy bitsy spider”, “This old man”, etc.) that were frequently embedded within the song-based picture books as they thought their children would have outgrown them:

The most surprising thing for me is that she was interested in the books at all. I had introduced these basic songs a couple of years ago and thought she would be bored and uninterested. She loved them! She used them at a different level by following the words in the song and as she sang it [the melody].... it gave her confidence to move through the book quickly instead of just reading which is a slower process. (PG33: Final reflection)

As one parent reflected at the end of the research process, “That connection between melody and reading was really profound for me” (PG22: Final reflection), revealing a

deepening understanding about the possibilities for using musical text as another home literacy activity in supporting her kindergarten-aged child's emerging literacy.

Discussion

The purpose of this action research study was to gain a deeper understanding of the role that song-based picture books could play in engaging kindergarten-aged children and their families in meaningful experiences with text. Data revealed the power of shared collaboration within a school-based family literacy program as providing a safe and encouraging space for forging connections between participants, and extending parent/guardian self-efficacy regarding literacy. As with Prins, Toso and Schafft (2009), findings in the present study indicated that adult family members felt like they were part of a shared community and built “between-family” social capital as they gathered together in the evenings at their children's school (Coleman, 1988; Hao & Bonstead-Bruns, 1998). These emerging relationships served both as a base of support for new learning as well as a peer motivator for continued participation with a variety of literacy practices in the home.

According to Prins et al. (2009), there may be several purposes for participation in family literacy programmes, including the role of social connections and their potential impact on the longevity of the learning that is built. Data in this study substantiated results from previous research (Reyes & Torres, 2007) about the power of the non-deficit model of family literacy in liberating participants towards achieving both literacy and social goals. Findings from our action research study revealed that this “relational...[and] democratic” process (p. 91) did provide the participants with an engaging social space in which to extend their parent/guardian knowledge through home literacy experimentation (i.e., song-based picture books) while still valuing the other literacy contexts that were active within individual households (Rodríguez-Brown, 2004). This group experience also provided participants with a safe space in which to gain greater confidence at singing children's songs thereby, providing a community pathway towards increasing singing self-efficacy as was needed for engagement with the song-based picture books.

New findings in this study surrounded the significance of the shared singing/reading experience with song-based picture books in engaging both parent/guardian and child in a reciprocity of joyful literacy exchange. Such results make an important empirical contribution to the existing pedagogical conversation surrounding the use of song-based picture books and its potential role in the literacy process. Malloch and Travarthen's (2009) idea that “our musicality serves our needs for companionship” (p. 6) seems appropriate given the new evidence in this study about the compelling power that sharing musical text had for reinforcing the familial bonds of parent/guardian and child. Adult family member's surprise discovery of a mutual, intergenerational joy for the shared singing experience speaks volumes towards the data about an increase in frequency in shared singing/reading time at home. Indeed, the bidirectional relationship of this joyful engagement by both parties (Meagher, Arnold, Doctoroff & Baker, 2008; Toomey & Sloan, 1994), created a pull towards literacy togetherness that many parents

felt was powerful enough to stay up late for and/or repeat many times throughout the day. Parents/guardians reported this enthusiasm for “being together in time” through music making (Overy & Molnar-Szakacs, 2009, p. 499) was infectious for all, with kindergarten-aged children often begging for more of this relationally based literacy time. This finding regarding the enjoyment factor of the song-based picture books for both parents and children is important given the positive relationship that has been suggested between the affective quality of home reading interactions and a child’s motivation to read (Baker, Mackler, Sonnenschein & Serpell, 2001; Sonnenschein et al., 2001).

Novel findings also included a revelation about the compelling power of song-based picture books in creating new opportunities for family literacy engagement among siblings. According to Gregory (2001), siblings have the potential to be part of a “synergy of learning” (p. 318) that could play a significant role in supporting literacy development among brothers and sisters. In our study, siblings of differing ages were so drawn to the joyful experience of making music together that they left their normal habit of engaging with printed text separately, and eagerly came together both as paired literacy partners (e.g., two siblings singing/reading together) and/or in conjunction with parents/guardians in a complete family literacy sharing experience. Although parents/guardians were surprised to see older children wanting to sing what they thought were *preschool-like* music (e.g., *Old MacDonald*), this joyful engagement of being *together in song* was a powerful draw to family members of all ages and revealed the potential that singing in partnership has for creating this kind of transformative learning space.

New findings in this study about the joys of singing pointed further to parents/guardian’s observations about their children’s playful interactions with the various phonological components of the song texts of song-based picture books (e.g., rhyming, alliteration, onset/rime, etc.). Such results connected with previous research that had documented young children’s engagement during singing as being naturally multimodal (Smith & Montgomery, 2007). Singing song-based picture books in this study seemed to provide increased opportunity for empowerment of literacy self through multiple meaning making (Kress, 2010), as was indicated by the parent’s/guardian’s frequent comments about their children’s use of gesture and movement during the shared singing/reading experience. These observations may shed further light as to why significance had been found in previous studies between time spent on classroom singing with song-based picture books and kindergarteners’ growth in oral language and phonological awareness (Fisher, 2001; Montgomery, 1998). Indeed, parent’s/guardian’s reports regarding children’s playful improvisation with the phonological components of language in our study spoke to “children’s powers of adaptation and improvisation . . . and their ways of stretching, reconfiguring, and rearticulating their [literacy] resources” (Dyson, 2001, p.11). Interestingly, the text repetition embedded within the verse-refrain musical structure found in many of the lyrics (e.g., texts) of the song-based picture books, was reported as promoting the most text inventiveness by the kindergarten-aged children. This provided further evidence for the value of utilizing natural episodes of musical repetition when attempting to support children’s ability to play with language

(Montgomery, 2013), and could provide a foundation upon which to build an authentic pedagogical partnership of literacy, music and play (Roskos & Christie, 2011).

Another important finding in this study revolved around the melodies embedded as the *tunes* of the song-based picture books. Parents reported their kindergarten-aged children used these familiar melodies as a kind of magic carpet to ride upon as they attempted to sing forward through the new vocabulary words they encountered within the song-based picture books. Parents/guardians reported greater confidence by their children when they sang a new book rather than when they read one, which spoke strongly to the power of the melodic phrase as an excellent mediator through which to gain fluency with oral language. Many of the song-based picture books contained texts that repeated each time a melodic phrase repeated, thus reinforcing previous findings about children's ability to use familiar melody as a cue in recalling text (Rainey & Larsen, 2002; Wallace, 1994). Children's habits of revisiting these melodies/texts away from the printed copy of the song-based picture books (e.g., singing the song while riding in the car) also provided greater opportunity for textual rehearsing than might occur with regular picture books. This prompted many parents/guardians to express surprise at how quickly their children could *memorize* the books. These results indicated the value for employing familiar melody as a pedagogical tool for supporting children's emerging literacy behaviours in terms of serving as a scaffold to help children *sing through* the new vocabulary words, while serving as a mediating tool for supporting children's development of phonological memory and greater oral fluency. Such new findings regarding melody, when combined with the other discoveries in this study about the role of song-based picture books in creating opportunities for joyful, relational literacy practices are significant and merit careful consideration by families and early childhood educators when planning for engaging literacy practices.

Limitations of the Study and Recommendations for Future Research

Limitations that should be considered within the findings of this research include the smaller number of families participating in the study. Although the 38 parent/guardian participants had children enrolled in kindergartens from two different school settings (e.g., public and private), future research may wish to replicate this study in non-urban settings or across a larger number of school sites. Researchers may also wish to consider additional ways to organize school-based family literacy sessions such that more families are able to commit to participation as it would seem desirable to gain traction with a larger percentage of families within any one school community. A second limitation may include the sole use of song-based picture books as the genre under consideration within the evening sessions in this study. Although findings indicated shared singing as a powerful experience for reinforcing family relationships and bringing joy to the shared reading experience, it may be that other genres of picture books could also stimulate this kind of relational experience for kindergarten families. Future research may wish to examine engagement with a variety of non-singing picture books (e.g., alphabet books, rhyming books, etc.) at the same time as song-based picture books to determine if shared reading with these types of *spoken text* picture books could also be effective in promoting meaningful experiences with text. Other

research may wish to examine the affective potential for a broader spectrum of artistically centred literacy activities at home beyond simply the shared singing/reading experiences in order to dig deeper into the potential for supporting joyful literacy practices through arts related activities. Finally, future research should also consider examination of the role of the kindergarten teacher in facilitating school-based family literacy programmes, as the kindergarten teachers did not play an active role in our research process. Adding this layer to the collaborative, school based family literacy sessions could promote even stronger communication between home and school and would investigate possibilities for building the mutual literacy partnerships and musical self-efficacy needed to support children's joyful literacy engagement through song.

Coda

Gaining a deeper understanding of the critical place of playful engagement in the literacy lives of kindergarten-aged children is essential to supporting children's motivation to engage with text. Building relationships plays a key role in supporting emergent literacy development and the shared music making of singing/reading song-based picture books was shown to create a powerful space for transformative, relational learning. Findings from this study clearly revealed the possibilities for forging powerful partnerships between home and school in supporting joyful engagement with singing for literacy. Indeed, song-based picture books could hold the key to creating the kind of sustainable, expressive literacy atmosphere determined as essential for motivating young children towards personal agency with text.

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Dr. Kathryn Smith teaches music education at the University of Alberta. Her career experiences include Director of the Child Study Centre, Music Consultant for Edmonton Public Schools and music teacher in rural, urban, and international schools. Her areas of research include musical play and early childhood music.

Appendix

Song-based Picture Books Used in Research

- Anderson, A. (2007). *Cows in the kitchen*. Auburn, ME: Child's Play International.
- Baker, K. (2009). *Big fat hen*. New York, NY: Voyager Books.
- Berkes, M. (2004). *Over in the ocean*. Nevada City, CA: Dawn Publications.
- Hort, L. (2000). *The seals on the bus*. New York, NY: Henry Holt & Co.
- McQuinn, A., & Fatus, S. (2009). *If you're happy & you know it!* Cambridge, MA: Barefoot Books.
- Raffi, C. (1993). *Spider on the floor*. New York, NY: Random House.
- Shulman, L., & Wolff, A. (2002). *Old MacDonald had a woodshop*. New York, NY: Puffin Books.
- Sloat, T. (1998). *There was an old lady who swallowed a trout!* New York, NY: Henry Holt & Co.
- Songs, S., & Engel, C. (2008). *Knick knack paddy whack*. Cambridge, MA: Barefoot Books.
- Trapani, I. (1993). *The itsy bitsy spider*. New York, NY: Charlesbridge.
- Vojtech, A. (2002). *Over in the meadow*. New York, NY: North-South Books.

Ward, J., & Gray, S. (2007). *There was a coyote who swallowed a flea*. Flagstaff, Z:
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