

Exploring Identity through Stories and Song

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“Storytelling, along with song and dance, is the first Art of the Human Family. Every Human Child is wired for it” (Brownlee, 2022a).

I have never seen a group of students “wired” for song and story like our preschool class at Creation School in 2021-2022. This class of 11 children, ages 3 and 4, would be considered typically developing, with their families representative of our neighborhood demographic. Seventy percent of the students were European American, 18% Latinx, and the rest reported a mixed heritage. The families who choose Creation School appreciate our philosophy of wonder and curiosity about our natural world, and they extend their children’s learning through weekend camping, hiking, or nature walks in the scenic Sonoran mountains that rim our town. Creation School is tuition based and most families can provide the cost of care in addition to their family needs.



Figure 1. Informal story reading in class

My co-teacher and I also represent our community. We are both of European American descent, Christian, and love nature and the outdoors. We are lifelong educators with many years of experience, driven by our passion for children and their development. Part-time teaching now suits our semi-retired lifestyle.

I noticed the students’ wiring for story and song during the first few weeks of class. The students would quickly gather for informal story reading (see Figure 1). Students also looked forward to the singing during our weekly chapels (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. Singing in Chapel

Throughout our time together, students interacted with each other in a lyrical sense, sometimes recounting songs they knew, such as “Paw Patrol, Paw Patrol,” in a singsong way that communicated a feeling or sense instead of an idea. I was reminded that music, like art, gesture, sound, drama, movement, and oral/written language, is a mode through which humans communicate their thoughts, feelings, and ideas (Eisner, 2002; Kress, 2003). I realized that the attraction to music was another avenue to storytelling, meaning-making, and sharing information about oneself.

I also noticed that students’ recounting of songs and stories they knew typically did not extend beyond current popular children’s shows. They were the consumers of music more so than the creators. I felt this class would

respond well to a curriculum rich in global song and story as a means of creating meaning, developing their identities, and exploring different cultures. This would broaden students' perspectives of the world and help them value the variety of ways people live, act, and believe.

I was hopeful that through our learning together, students would see themselves not as consumers, but as creators, story writers, and music makers. We have a flexible framework for our curriculum based on Bible stories. Child-led projects, with play and exploration are key in our lesson planning. By introducing appropriate books connected to songs, I felt we could expand how the students interacted with music and stories.



Figure 3. Rainbow dancing with scarves

Exploring Identity Through Books and Songs

One of our first offerings occurred during the lesson sharing the narrative of Noah and the Ark, in which Noah sees a rainbow after the ark comes to rest on dry land (Berghof & Kramer, 2012). To extend our discussion of rainbows, we listened to the Zuni Pueblo Rainbow Dance (2017), using colorful scarves for our music and movement that week. Hearing the music drew in all the students, and together they responded to the rhythms and beats with the colorful scarves (see Figure 3).

Over the next few days, we also added instruments: bells, shakers, drums, and cymbals. Students explored the instruments enthusiastically! We took the instruments and Rainbow Dance soundtrack outside to give us more space for dancing. Figure 4 shows a boy working with a percussion instrument.

In retrospect, I wish I had connected this experience with *When Clay Sings* by Byrd Baylor and Tom Bahti (1987). The story describes the voice of broken pottery, a remnant of a different time in the Southwest. The students could have been given clay of their own to explore and mold, creating not only a pot, but a story. At the time I felt the concept was too abstract for our 3-year-olds, but I think the experience of the music, the story, and the clay together would have given students a sense of the culture and a way that people can give voice to their experiences.



Figure 4. Percussion on the grass

I Got the Rhythm

Our next book was *I Got the Rhythm* by Connie Schofield-Morrison (2014). The story recounts the journey of a young girl through her urban neighborhood. She begins by thinking of a rhythm in her mind, and then finds ways her body can replicate that rhythm. Throughout the book, she encounters different people with whom to share her rhythm. We introduced the book by first creating a beat with our hands and knees. Then I read the book in rhythm with the beats students were making. The story ends with the invitation "I got the rhythm and you can too." After several readings, a smaller group of students acted out the rhythms established by the narrator and then thought about which rhythm was their favorite. Several felt the

rhythm with their knees (knock knock), some felt the rhythm with their feet (stomp stomp), but the biggest favorite was the rhythm in their hips (shake shake), which quickly turned into the rhythm in their bottoms! The way students acted out the rhythms showed that they “can, too” see their identity as creators and music makers, just like the child in the story.

The value of this experience was the physical connection between the young girl in the story and the students in the class. Although the child in the story is an African American child in a multi-ethnic neighborhood, our students felt the same things she felt, moved the way she moved, and enjoyed the things she enjoyed, helping them realize the common human experiences they share with others in the world (Short & Thomas, 2011).



Figure 5. Practicing for Las Posadas



Figure 6. Learning about the power of candlelight

The Night of Las Posadas

Christmas was right around the corner, and every year the school participates in the Las Posadas. Las Posadas is a tradition from Mexico and several Latin American countries depicting the arrival of Mary and Joseph into Bethlehem. The students in our class were new to our school tradition, so we worked on the Bible story as well as the Las Posadas narrative and the traditional song sung during the event (Barrara, 2019). Tomie dePaolo’s (2001) *The Night of the Las Posadas* was helpful in

explaining how the tradition is celebrated in Mexico. We practiced what would happen before our actual Las Posadas celebration (see Figure 5).

As we explored the traditions in the story, we shared what we saw in our own Christmas celebrations. Families shared their home traditions through a survey and we talked about the similarities and differences during class time. Candles and candy canes were class favorites and a common thread among the families experiences (see Figure 6).

In learning the song and the story, the students could “try on” an identity from another culture similar to their own. Participating in the Las Posadas helped expand their understanding of cultures that live next door or in another part of the world. Just before Christmas break, students traveled from station to station around the school campus, re-enacting the story of Mary and Joseph finding no room in the inn.

When I reflected on this time with our students, I realized that I missed a great opportunity to explore the story as writers. Christmas is very busy, but I wish I would have set aside time for students to write/dictate their own stories or songs. In my effort to “teach” them the story of Christmas, I neglected to acknowledge their identities as writers and storytellers of their own experiences and simply enforced their identity as consumers.

Spring Celebrations

Spring marks the celebration of the Jewish festival of the Passover. Music is integral in Hebrew culture, and as we studied the Biblical accounts of Passover, I shared the distinct sounds of Israeli and Greek folk dancing, such as “Zorba Greek Line Dance” (2015), and the Shemah (see Figure 7).

To reinforce the idea that stories and songs belong together, we read *The Little Overcoat*, adapted by Yetta Trachtman Goodman from a traditional folksong (Goodman & Arenson, 1998). Students enjoyed the dancing but were very anxious to be outside. It was during the transition from indoor learning to outdoor learning that the students took ownership of their identities as singers and storytellers.

I was inspired by a quote from *Leading Literate Lives* by Stephanie Affinito (2021) in which she states that, “organizing the space around you facilitates the kind of life you want to live” (p.23). Affinito encourages readers to have books easily accessible. As I prepared the outdoor space for the students, I made sure music and books were available for their exploration.

Our outdoor music center was nothing more than old kitchenware bolted to a frame but students spent lots of time



Figure 7. Zorba Greek Line Dance



Figure 8. Outdoor music center

drumming, pounding, or jangling (see Figure 8). One group of boys created a band, shouting “Yayaya” and fervently drumming, before running a loop around the playground, only to return as some kind of chorus – “Yayaya” – then off running again. I wondered if their unconscious pattern was a deeper human experience bubbling up through the generations of hunters going out and then returning to celebrate.

Some students spent more time in the quiet area, looking at books together in the shade (see Figure 9).



I was able to capture one student embracing the idea that she was a song writer and storyteller. She was singing an original song with the words, “Everyone Like Me.” I said, “Hey, Cassidy! Can we turn your song into a book?” She nodded. Together we created a small pamphlet with the words, “Everyone like me, everyone like me. You are....” She was not interested in illustrating the book, just pleased that her words were recorded.

Figure 9. Outdoor reading center

The Little Band

Our final activity of the school year was around *The Little Band* by James Sage and Keiko Narahashi (1991). To set up the framework of students as musicians and participating in the story, we sang the American Spiritual, “Little David, Play on Your Harp” while I showed them the picture from the Bible story (Berghof & Kramer, 2012). Then we substituted the words of the chorus to include their names, and the instrument they were playing.



Little Blaise, play on your jingle bells...
Little Mackenzie, play on your maracas...
Little Landry, play on your guitar...
Little Blakelee, play on your eggs...
Little James, play on your jingle bells...
Little Luke, play on your maracas....
Little Asher, play on your drum...
Hallelu!

We also practiced rhythms with our homemade rhythm sticks made from mesquite trees (see Figure 10). The students enjoyed tapping along with the same beat as an in-sync band. They showed growth in self-control from the beginning of the school year where they explored their individual rhythms.

Figure 10. Rhythm sticks from mesquite trees

Closing Thoughts

The Little Band is a beautiful story of how music can change you. Even after the players are gone, nothing is ever the same again. The story could be a metaphor for the time we spent together at Creation School. The work of creating identity as songwriters and storytellers will not end when the school year is over. Even though the students may not remember much from their first year at preschool, they demonstrated their understanding and potential to be creators, not just consumers.

Through this year, I have learned that students have the capacity to embrace different cultures through the music and stories of a culture. Students went from only singing songs and stories they knew to experiencing multiple ways of knowing and viewing the world through music and stories (Short & Thomas, 2011). They responded to music and stories in authentic ways and created music and stories unique to them. I have also learned that I need to take the time to write down children’s stories. The additional exercise would not be used as a form of assessment (although it could be used to inform lessons), but as a gift to the child as a future person who may forget the songs and stories of their preschool years.

“We are what we imagine ourselves to be from the ‘Who Am I?’ story we create about ourselves, (and this is the important bit), whether it is true or not. None of us starts off with a story about who we are, we have to construct it: word-by-word, image-by-image, sentence-by-sentence, experience-by-experience” (Brownlee, 2022b). It is my hope that the “Who Am I” story that children created for themselves this school year includes a description of stories and songs as indicators of their identity.

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