

By Carolyn J. Stufft

Reading to the Rhythm: Integrating Music Into Literacy Instruction



Abstract

As a result of high-stakes testing pressure and financial strain within schools, fine arts programs continue to be cut from K-12 education. While research indicates the benefits of music related to learning, brain development, and reading (Kraus, Hornickel, Strait, Slater, & Thompson, 2014), many students do not receive instruction in the fine arts. Language arts teachers are in a unique position to incorporate fine arts in their classroom as a way to facilitate student learning in light of research emphasizing the link between music and literacy. As we consider the 50th anniversary of *English in Texas*, it is fitting to reflect on the ways that the music of yesterday and today is part of literacy instruction. In this article, the author presents examples of ways to use music in a middle school classroom to support reading comprehension and to facilitate writing.

Keywords: literacy, music, comprehension

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Teachers nationwide are experiencing increased pressure stemming from the continued emphasis on high-stakes testing. Now more than ever, the “testing tail has definitely been wagging the curriculum/instruction canine” (Popham, 2008, p. 284). As decisions are made regarding how to best prepare students for success on standardized tests, one area often cut from the school day is fine arts; as Nel Noddings (2005) has observed, we often give up the good practices along with the bad. When considering the hidden curriculum, which refers to what students learn from a school culture and includes elements such as program funding and time allocation (Glatthorn, 2008; Jackson, 1968), program cuts and reduced time designated for music and art (e.g., Davis, 2013) are sending students a clear message that fine arts are unimportant, which is in contrast to research that underscores the importance of music in brain development particularly in relation to reading (Kraus, Hornickel, Strait, Slater, & Thompson, 2014).

The *English in Texas* editors’ call for this issue emphasizes the essential role of the arts in language arts curricula. Those familiar with Gardner’s (1983) theory of multiple intelligences understand that students have different strengths, interests, and abilities, including musical intelligence (which can relate to singing or playing an instrument), visual-spatial intelligence (which can relate to drawing, photography, or interactions with video or multimedia images), and bodily-kinesthetic intelligence (which can relate to dance). Research provides support for the positive

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contribution of music to students’ overall cognitive abilities (e.g., Hall, 1952; Jackson & Tlauka, 2004; Jones, West, & Estell, 2006) and specifically to their acquisition of reading and writing (e.g., Jalongo & Bromley, 1984; McCarthy, 1985; Kraus, Hornickel, Strait, Slater, & Thompson, 2014). The use of music in the language arts classroom can support students’ fluency, vocabulary, and overall reading comprehension (Diamantes, Young, & McBee, 2002; Frasher, 2014; Paquette & Rieg, 2008).

In the same way that literacy development involves listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Wiggins, 2007), music involves “oral, aural, and print communication” (Frasher, 2014, p. 6); thus, reading and music can be viewed as parallel skills because they share these features. Additionally, the use of music as part of reading instruction may help motivate and engage students (Register, Darrow, Standley, & Swedberg, 2007). Through the lens of reader response theory (Rosenblatt, 1978), an interaction among author, reader, and text takes place during reading. The use of music may help engage students in their interaction with a text. The challenge is for educators to integrate music into the language arts classroom in ways that connect with instructional purposes, interest students, and encourage creative and critical thought.

In my own middle school classroom, I often use music to help students connect with text and to promote deeper understanding of plot, characters, and theme. At the end of reading *Tuck Everlasting* by Natalie Babbitt (1975) with my class, I play the Joni Mitchell song “The Circle Game” (1970, track 12) as a way to help students think more deeply about the themes of the book. In *Tuck Everlasting*, members of the Tuck family are able to live forever. Jesse Tuck meets his soulmate Winnie Foster and hopes that she will drink the spring water that will allow her, too, to be everlasting; Winnie, however, declines this offer and chooses instead to age as she moves through her life (Babbitt, 1975).

One question I ask my students is whether they would choose to drink the spring water and live forever. The majority of students each year respond that yes, they would choose to be everlasting like the Tuck family. When I ask students to consider hardships associated with living forever, they often struggle to consider this side of the situation. After we finish reading the book, I provide a copy of the lyrics to “The Circle Game” and play the song for

my class. We listen to the song first, and then we stop to read the lyrics and listen to the song a second time. Each year, students ask if they may sing along and many decide to do so during the second time. Then I ask students to think about the lyrics and how they relate to *Tuck Everlasting*. Many students comment on the line “Fearful when the sky was full of thunder” in the first verse because a thunderstorm is part of pivotal plot action in *Tuck Everlasting*. I also guide students to the part of the chorus that reads: “We’re captive on the carousel of time. We can’t return we can only look behind from where we came and go round and round and round in the circle game” (Mitchell, 1970, track 12).

These lyrics help students think about what it would be like to feel “captive on the carousel of time” like the Tuck family experiences in *Tuck Everlasting*. The use of music in this way aids students in interacting with the text (Rosenblatt, 1978) and comprehending the story. The melancholy lilt of Joni Mitchell’s voice singing these lyrics seems to resonate with students, who often shift their decision of whether they would want to live forever like the Tucks. The imagery of being stuck on a carousel is something that students can relate to because they have background knowledge of carousels and the motion of the horses up and down while the carousel itself spins. After listening to this song, students begin to describe that life for the Tucks must be like that carousel; even though the family engaged in daily activities like cooking, these actions did not move the Tucks forward through life since they never aged. Instead, the characters could only bob up and down while still being tethered to the carousel representing the circular, rather than linear, movement in their lives. The use of the song “The Circle Game” helps my students connect more deeply with the plot and theme of *Tuck Everlasting*.

In another instance, I have used music to help my students connect with characters, setting, and plot and to help them think more about the author’s purpose when reading *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963* (Curtis, 1995). This book focuses on the three Watson children who live with their parents in Michigan but travel to their grandmother’s house in Alabama. The middle child, Kenny, narrates the book, although much of the humor results from his older brother Byron’s antics while the more serious themes of the book emerge when the family worries that younger sister Joey has been killed during a church bombing. With this particular book, I use music in different ways. First, I use music to help my students better understand interactions between characters. When Byron is in trouble with his father, there is a reference to “Taps” (Butterfield, 1862). Some of my students are familiar with the song prior to reading the book, while others are not; none recognize it by name, however. Listening to the slow trumpet notes helps my students visualize a scene wherein Byron moves slowly, perhaps with his head hung low, to face his father and find out his punishment.

The Watson family’s vehicle is an Ultra-Glide, within which Mr. Watson installs a record player. One of the songs that the family listens to regularly, including while on their journey from Michigan to Alabama, is “Yakey Yak” (Leiber & Stoller, 1958, track 7). I play “Yakey Yak” for my students so that they can experience

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exactly what the family listened to during the road trip and so that they can hear the type of music popular during this era. My students often comment on the lyrics and their relationship to the members of the Watson family. For example, the oldest child Byron is described as a troublemaker who is sent to spend the summer with his grandmother in Alabama in order to separate him from friends who are a bad influence. My students notice that the lines “Just tell your hoodlum friends outside you ain’t got time to take a ride” describe the way that Mrs. Watson wants Byron to avoid bad influences. At the same time, many students can relate to the opening lines of the song—“Take out the papers and the trash or you don’t get no spendin’ cash”—because they, too, complete chores to earn allowance. The students also connect lyrics to the expectation that the Watson children help clean the house and complete chores. My students point out that the lyric “Yakey yak don’t talk back” describes the way that Byron would often boast and antagonize others around friends or his siblings yet knew better than to talk back to his parents and particularly to his grandmother. Both “Taps” and “Yakey Yak” help my students think more deeply about the characters and visualize the setting and connect with the text.

When the Watson family is rocked by the bombing of a church in Birmingham, they rush to the scene afraid that Joey is trapped inside. They later discover that Joey is safe, but Christopher Paul Curtis describes the little girls inside the church who were wearing dresses and bows in their hair. The writing evokes strong mental imagery of the white and blue clothing with red blood from the blast. For this somber scene in the book, I play the Blind Boys of Alabama’s version of the traditional spiritual “This May Be the Last Time” (Fountain & Scott, 2001, track 12) for my students. The lyrics include repetition of the phrase “this may be the last time” with the final line of “I really don’t know what tomorrow will bring.” The ending of the song, in particular, helps my students make connections to how the Watsons must have felt: the shock of an unexpected tragedy and uncertainty in that moment regarding what was in store in the future.

I also use music with another Christopher Paul Curtis book, *Bud, Not Buddy* (1999/2002), which is set during the 1930s and includes characters who are jazz musicians. The first time I read this book with middle school students, I quickly realized that my students were unfamiliar with jazz music and did not know what

the genre sounded like. I play Duke Ellington’s “It Don’t Mean a Thing (If It Ain’t Got That Swing)” (Ellington & Mills, 1931, track 8) to help my students better understand the type of music that the characters played in the time period and that the main character, Bud, listened to. At the opening bars of the song, my students’ eyes widened and grins form as they bob their heads to the music. Each time I play this song, my students comment on how “happy” the song feels.

By introducing my students to jazz music, I am able to also help them understand the music that would have formed a daily “soundtrack” for Bud. When we read about Bud spending time listening to the band members play jazz, my students have an example of the style of music. To expand my students’ experiences with other jazz songs, I play a song each day prior to reading. We listened to the Benny Goodman Orchestra play “Sing, Sing, Sing” (Prima, 1936, track 6) and to Ella Fitzgerald sing George and Ira Gershwin’s “I Got Rhythm” (1930). We also listen to Louis Armstrong, Billie Holiday, and Charlie Parker; with each new song, my students seem even more interested in finding out what would happen to Bud in our story. In this case, the music helps students better understand the setting in ways beyond what I could explain with a map of Michigan (the story’s setting) or with a brief overview of 1930s history. The jazz songs paint a picture of life during that time and of the sensory experiences Bud would have had.

In addition to playing music connected to books that we read, I also use music to encourage my middle school students to be producers (not only consumers) of text. During the final grading period of each year, I ask my eighth grade students to complete the “Soundtrack of My Life” project, adapted from the ReadWriteThink “Soundtrack for My Life” lesson (Spangler, n.d.). As part of this project, my students select at least five songs that, based on the lyrics, represent them at different stages in their lives. Rather than select current hit songs or songs that they find catchy, students must look for song lyrics that connect to them or to an aspect of their lives in some way. I ask my students to select songs from at least two different genres. Since my students are familiar with literary genres, I use this project as an opportunity to connect their prior knowledge with new knowledge by introducing them to a variety of musical genres (e.g., big band, bossa nova, and Delta blues) that they may not normally listen to on their own. For each of the five songs students select, they write a paragraph explaining why they selected the song, what specifically they connected to in the lyrics, and the relationship between the song lyrics and their life.

I provide students with square paper the size of CD inserts to use for this project; students create their own case insert that contains each song title and their written reflection about why they selected each song. As part of the project, I also have students create a title for their soundtrack, include a track list of songs, and create cover art. For the title, I recommend that students first select their songs and write about their connections for each song; then I encourage them to be creative and to think deeply about a title that represents their journey up through the end of middle



Figure 1. An example of one student's CD cover art for the "Soundtrack of My Life" literacy project.

Table 1
Literature and Music Pairings for Middle School

Literature	Music
<i>Bridge to Terabithia</i> by Katherine Paterson	"A Thousand Years" by Christina Perri "Pure Imagination" by Leslie Bricusse and Anthony Newley; performed by Gene Wilder or as a cover by Maroon 5
<i>The Giver</i> by Lois Lowry	"Aftermath" by R.E.M.
<i>Maniac Magee</i> by Jerry Spinelli	"Running Away" by Jesse McCartney
<i>The Outsiders</i> by S. E. Hinton	"Stay Gold" by Stevie Wonder
<i>Tunes for Bears to Dance To</i> by Robert Cormier	"You've Got a Friend" by Carole King
<i>The Wednesday Wars</i> by Gary D. Schmidt	"Fortunate Son" by Creedence Clearwater Revival
<i>Wringer</i> by Jerry Spinelli	"Live and Let Die" by Paul McCartney
<i>A Wrinkle in Time</i> by Madeleine L'Engle	"Only If..." by Enya

Table 2
 ELAR TEKS Related to Music Integration

6th grade §110.18	7th grade §110.19	8th grade §110.20
<p>(3) Reading/Comprehension of Literary Text/Theme and Genre. Students analyze, make inferences and draw conclusions about theme and genre in different cultural, historical, and contemporary contexts and provide evidence from the text to support their understanding. Students are expected to:</p> <p>(A) infer the implicit theme of a work of fiction, distinguishing theme from the topic.</p>	<p>(3) Reading/Comprehension of Literary Text/Theme and Genre. Students analyze, make inferences and draw conclusions about theme and genre in different cultural, historical, and contemporary contexts and provide evidence from the text to support their understanding. Students are expected to:</p> <p>(A) describe multiple themes in a work of fiction;</p> <p>(C) analyze how place and time influence the theme or message of a literary work.</p>	<p>(3) Comprehension of Literary Text/Theme and Genre. Students analyze, make inferences and draw conclusions about theme and genre in different cultural, historical, and contemporary contexts and provide evidence from the text to support their understanding. Students are expected to:</p> <p>(C) explain how the values and beliefs of particular characters are affected by the historical and cultural setting of the literary work.</p>
<p>(13) Reading/Media Literacy. Students use comprehension skills to analyze how words, images, graphics, and sounds work together in various forms to impact meaning. Students will continue to apply earlier standards with greater depth in increasingly more complex texts. Students are expected to:</p> <p>(A) explain messages conveyed in various forms of media.</p>	<p>(13) Reading/Media Literacy. Students use comprehension skills to analyze how words, images, graphics, and sounds work together in various forms to impact meaning. Students will continue to apply earlier standards with greater depth in increasingly more complex texts. Students are expected to:</p> <p>(A) interpret both explicit and implicit messages in various forms of media.</p>	<p>(13) Reading/Media Literacy. Students use comprehension skills to analyze how words, images, graphics, and sounds work together in various forms to impact meaning. Students will continue to apply earlier standards with greater depth in increasingly more complex texts. Students are expected to:</p> <p>(B) interpret how visual and sound techniques (e.g., special effects, camera angles, lighting, music) influence the message.</p>

Music provides a common ground for us to explore new topics, to connect more deeply with literacy, and to weave together today’s learning with the songs of the past as well as the present.

school. Students have the option of burning the songs onto a CD to include with their project. An example of one student’s cover art is presented in Figure 1. Table 1 includes additional examples of pairings of literature and music to help educators incorporate the arts into literacy instruction. Table 2 provides specific connections with the TEKS.

Through the use of music, my middle school students are able to better connect with characters, understand plot and setting, and think more abstractly about literary themes. Music provides an outlet for my students to express themselves through writing too. As educators we must continue to adapt and expand our classroom practices to incorporate multimodal literacies and to meet the needs of our 21st century learners. Music provides a common ground for us to explore new topics, to connect more deeply with literacy, and to weave together today’s learning with the songs of the past as well as the present.

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