LITERACY AREA

"The Indigenous Folksong Reading Curriculum"
By Karen Ellis

Listen and find the music of the text (speech)
Through the music find the rhythm
Through the rhythm you will understand the meaning of the words . . .

Children's rhymes and songs often fill playgrounds and urban streets. They may provide a gentle reminder of youthful imagination or innocence. Such rhymes and songs, however, also can provide useful resources to help children, particularly at-risk and dialect speakers, improve their language skills and enjoy the opportunities that may come with those skills. The "Interactive Folksong Reading Curriculum" is an innovative approach to teaching Standard English that employs these rhymes and songs in the learning process. Since the curriculum has as its foundation the rhymes and songs of the children who are learning, it can be flexibly adapted to any setting to improve communication skills.

Promotion of improved communication skills should be a national priority. Never has the need for adequate communication skills been greater. As information becomes the currency of the U.S. and world economies, those who do not have adequate communication skills will be unable to participate successfully in public life or the workplace. The U.S. population is continuing to become increasingly diverse, and while that diversity may provide many opportunities for this nation, much effort has to go to ensure that all in this diverse population have equal opportunities. This is particularly true in regard to language skills.
The "Indigenous Folksong Reading Curriculum,"
A thematic reading curriculum, focuses on raising the reading levels of children, particularly at-risk students and dialect speakers. This method allows children to bring their playground poetry (indigenous music) into the classroom for a thematic reading and language arts-based module. It builds a bridge from dialect spoken in the home to Standard English.

Dr. Robin Sabino suggests you READ:

Teach 60% of children in every city school district throughout the United States to read and write Standard English. Statistics show that these children never read beyond the fourth grade level, graduate from high school, or are able to find future employment.

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"The Interactive Folksong Reading Curriculum"

Offers the following advantages:

1) applicability in all settings.
2) an interdisciplinary approach. Read more about how Music Makes You Smarter Research
3) acknowledgement that children have different learning styles.
4) having the children as active participants in the learning process with their inquiries into the cultural and artistic roots of their rhymes and songs.
5) providing through the children's active involvement reinforcement of their self-esteem.
6) a public folklore project.
7) meets and exceeds all State Standards and Benchmarks
8) proven successful program that raises reading scores 1 to 2 years in a few months.
**Pedagogy / Methodology**

Orff Schulwerk is music instruction based on things children like to do: sing, chant rhymes, clap, dance, and keep a beat. This methodology integrates movement and music. Ellis is the author of _Domino_, Book & Cassette Cross Curriculur - Interdisciplinary - Multi-Cultural Resource
60 Traditional Children's Songs, Proverbs, and Culture From the American Virgin Islands
45 minute Live Sound Field Recording

A collection of Caribbean play songs. She gathered the material for _Domino_ while teaching English and managing a six-acre sugar cane plantation in the U.S. Virgin Islands. Today she is the owner of Guavaberry Books, Diversity University Collaboratory, an interdisciplinary electronic discussion list and the Educational CyberPlayGround, a World Wide Web portal for educational resources.

**Multiple Intelligences Theory by Dr. Howard Gardner**

A multicultural language arts program involving an interdisciplinary approach, using the multiple intelligences pedagogical model developed by Dr. Howard Gardner. Indigenous folksongs collected from various cultures will become the basis of the language arts curriculum. This curriculum allows for a cross-curricular interdisciplinary platform that invites all the adjuctive teachers to collaborate.

**Ethnomusicology - Primary Research Model**

Primary research skills will be taught to children as they "discover" preserve and digitize their own unique folksong traditions that will be collected for the National Children's Folksong Repository, an online database serving our nation. Children and teachers are given a civic project that will snapshot our own cultural heritage for the millenium. This database will be searchable by State, name of song, and grade level.

**FACT SHEET**

**Company Profile:**
The Educational CyberPlayGround TM is a privately held Pennsylvania company specializing in the creation and delivery of Collaborative Online Curriculum, Educational Content, and Education Vendor Directory. The Educational CyberPlayGround manages a database of educational information for the general public.
Mission Statement:

The "Indigenous Folksong Reading Curriculum," a thematic reading module, focuses on raising the reading levels of children, particularly at-risk students and dialect speakers. This method allows children to bring their indigenous playground poetry (indigenous music) into the classroom for a thematic reading and language arts-based module. It builds a bridge from dialect spoken in the home to Standard English.

Objectives are to:

1) Teach 60% of children in every city school district throughout the United States to read and write Standard English, and to focus on dialect Speakers. Statistics show that these children do not read beyond the fourth grade level, graduate from high school, or are able to find future employment.
2) Integrate literacy, music, and technology in the classroom.
3) Collect indigenous playground poetry, like an ethnomusicologist.
4) Understand the components of the indigenous folksong reading module.
5) Acquire the fundamentals that will allow replication of this project in summer school and afterschool programs throughout the school year.

Curriculum Overview:

A multicultural language arts program involving an interdisciplinary approach, using the multiple intelligences pedagogical model of Howard Gardner. Indigenous folksongs collected from various cultures will become the basis of the language arts curriculum module.

Evaluation and Results:

Acquired skills mentioned above will enable:

1) Children to produce from collected material their own playground poetry books.

2) To record their indigenous playground poetry for the "National Children's Folksong Repository" which will be linked to the Folklore Archive in the Library of Congress.

3) provide the basis for spelling tests each week.

4) each child will produce their own book of poetry from what was collected.
6) allow the children to complete a class art project that includes all the poetry that was collected.

7) raise their reading levels 1-2 years in less than a school year.

The developer of "the interactive Folksong Reading Curriculum" is Karen S. Ellis, who earned a B.S. in elementary education from Temple University, where she graduated magna cum laude. She also has certification in Orff Shulwerk from Memphis State University.

Orff Schulwerk is a method of teaching music that involves instruction based on things children like to do: sing, chant rhymes, clap, dance, and keep a beat. Ellis is the author of _Domino_, a collection of Caribbean play songs. She gathered the material for _Domino_ while teaching English and managing a six-acre sugar cane plantation in the U.S. Virgin Islands.

"Every child will listen to the Barney song and sing it back again without prompting," says Robert Zatorre, a neuropsychologist at the Montreal Neurological Institute at McGill University. "This is very different from an activity like reading, where exposure alone won't do anything, no matter how long you sit in front of a book." Such talent, however, may not be too far removed from the abilities that enable an infant to learn to speak. Language and music are both forms of communication that rely on highly organized variations in sound pitches, stress, and rhythm. Both are rich in "harmonics": the overtones above the primary frequency of a sound that give it resonance and purity. In language, sounds are combined into patterns -- words -- that refer to something other than themselves. This makes it possible for us to communicate complexities of information and meaning far beyond the capabilities of other species. But notes, chords, and melodies lack explicit meanings. So why does music exist? Is our appreciation of it a biological universal, or a cultural creation? Why does it have such power to stir our emotions? Does music serve some adaptive purpose, or is it nothing more than an exquisitely pointless epiphenomenon -- like a talent for chess, or the ability to taste the overtones of plum or vanilla in a vintage wine? "In Western society we're inclined to think of music as something extra," says Sandra Trehub, a developmental psychologist at the University of Toronto. "But you can't find a culture that doesn't have music. Everybody is listening."

"The Indigenous Folksong Reading Curriculum"

A model for systemic change and an example of creative problem solving. Funding for this project will help lead to societal and institutional change. Successful implementation of this program will help correct an unjust and destructive situation by empowering participants and addressing the root causes of illiteracy.
Teaching Children on St. Croix

During my second year on St. Croix, I taught the fourth grade. Here the age range of the children was from ten to sixteen years old, yet many of them couldn’t read or write or even speak standard English. I continued to collect the children’s games and songs. The songs were now rhythmically and melodically notated for the first time, with the help of my friend Carl Bernstein, a classical guitar player.

The native population of St. Croix are called Crucians. They speak English, although it is not always easy for a mainlander to understand the Crucian speech. They have many words for objects and actions and feelings which seem quite irregular to non-Crucian ears. Roots of these words and phrases have been traced to African languages. It is a dialect of English, a patois. The Crucians also express themselves not only with diverse words, but also by having the order of the words be unlike Standard American English. Sometimes alterations in the word order denote time. The Crucian speaker can, when telling of an event which occurred in the past, indicate by the word order whether it happened just this morning or happened a long time ago.

One of the difficulties I had as a teacher was in understanding the dialect, and one of the difficulties the children had as students was in understanding my dialect. Now, these children were required to learn to read by reading books that were written in standard English. Yet the children don’t speak Standard English. Standard English is a second language for them.

People who speak in a patois, or a dialect of Standard English, have through their language separated themselves from the mainstream of society. Society essentially dictates that they speak Standard English and write standard English, the language of commerce. In order for these people to join in with the so-called “regular” society, such as the academic society, they are required to speak the language of that world.

Dialects which differ from the standard spoken and written language have come to be considered inferior to the standard language. Since the dialect is considered inferior, when the people speak their own language, we sometimes can embarrass them. In embarrassing them, we cause them to feel shame about who they are and what they are speaking. Their shame makes them feel alienated from and disrespected by the society they wish to join. It should seem obvious that when you shame and alienate someone, you don’t give them any reason to respect you or join you. This is a global problem for all countries and territories of colonial rule.

It is very important for all peoples to have their own language respected. If it can be communicated that their language is colorful and descriptive and eloquent in
its own way, then we can give their language the respect it deserves, and can then respect the people who speak it. These people will then feel more inclined to respect themselves and the government they must now assimilate. The language, and creole, dialect, patwa, pigin, and vernacular speakers all over the world should be respected.

In the elementary schools on St. Croix, even the children’s books themselves were ridiculous. The stories in these books, which the children were being asked to read and to learn from, had to do with, say, snow, which these children had never seen and had very little concept of. Or there might be a story involving a train, and none of the children had ever seen a train. Many, or most, of the children who grew up on one side of the island, in Frederickstead, never left that town. They were never even taken to see Christiansted, a few miles down the road. They had a comparatively isolated upbringing. The material they were being asked to read did not reflect the environment in which these children grew up. Children need culturally relevant content.

In schools on the mainland, teaching English as a second language is considered relevant and real. But here I was on St. Croix, being expected to teach English as though there were no language problem at all. As a result of this narrow attitude, there were many children in my classes who were a couple of years behind in their reading level.

Spelling was very difficult for the Crucian children, as they don’t pronounce words with the same tones and inflections as used in Standard English. And, certainly, teaching spelling to standard-English-speaking children is difficult enough! For instance, if a student wanted to say the word “mouth,” she might pronounce the word as “mout.” She wouldn’t say “mouth” because the final “th” sound is not present in the Crucian Dialect.

Every child needs to know how to talk before he or she can learn to read. The rudiment of talking is chanting. All babies are sung to or chanted to, for this is the beginning of the language experience which each baby has. Those early language experiences create reading readiness.

Here on St. Croix, the verbal skills of the children were under-developed simply because these children were not encouraged to carry on conversations with their elders. They were basically expected to listen and to do what they were told to do and be obedient but not really engage in a lot of descriptive conversation. This is a cultural difference. Parents did not elicit a lot of descriptive discussion from their children, but, in the schools, the children were expected to have these verbal skills. Their talents were in their songs and in their chants, which is their living poetry. And so I decided to create my link with these children and establish an understanding with them based upon what they knew, upon their verbal skills, their culture, their world.
These are the grounds under which I resolved to develop my own technique for teaching reading. One day, in the fourth grade class, I took the reading books away. I began to draw upon the techniques which I had learned in Orff-Schulwerk. I started first by using the songs and games which I had picked up on the playground. To learn to read and write English, the children would have to develop a keen ear for listening. The English that they were required to learn was a different language than the language they spoke, so they really had to listen carefully.

First I wrote sentences on the blackboard, sentences in standard English, such as “What time is it?” Below this, I would write a phrase or sentence in dialect. Then I asked the students to differentiate which one was which, and to point out the differences between the two sentences. I wrote in dialect just as they said it, with “dem” for “them,” for example. That was the beginning of how I realized that the children were not aware of the differences. They were not aware of what I was speaking as being Standard English and what they were speaking as being a dialect. So we began, fresh, on that basis.

I moved then into ear training, Using ear training, I asked my class to watch what I did and to echo the sounds I made. I would clap a rhythm, then have them repeat the pattern back to me. In this way, they were forced to develop their listening skills. They also had to develop their coordination, in order to clap. Not that they couldn’t clap - of course they could clap – but some children didn’t necessarily know when to stop, or how to add an accented clap with the right timing. Many times when we were clapping together, it would be the children who were the slow learners who would not clap the pattern correctly or wouldn’t stop clapping when everyone else did. These children would in this case obtain immediate feedback from the rest of the class, because, instead of stopping at the right time, they were clapping when they weren’t supposed to be. Their classmates would look at them, and the culprits would get embarrassed.

One of the elements which is crucial in every child’s development is mastery over his or her body. If you think about an equivalent situation for an adult - to not have control of his or her body - it is a highly awkward and embarrassing condition. With the ear training exercises, we had a very strong motivation for children to want to listen: to avoid personal embarrassment and also to master coordination.

The rhythms which I clapped out were, at first, not the rhythms from their games. At first, they were just simple, ordinary rhythms. Beginning with one measure, I then expanded the clapping to two measures. We’d start with four even counts: TA TA TA TA. Then I’d place an accent on the first beat: TA Ti Ti Ti, TA Ti Ti Ti. Then more complex, a syncopated rhythm: TA TiTi TA TA TiTi TiTi TiTi TA TA

When the students clapped the rhythm back to me, they’d have to respond absolutely correctly. If a student wasn’t right on the money, the other members of the class would look at the offender, and point or laugh. And it was obvious -
there could be no deception; a student couldn’t say “Oh, I did too hear you!” or “Oh, I did too clap that right!” It was obvious that either they were “there” or they weren’t. They were very motivated to be “there” because the children didn’t want to be embarrassed, for there was a great deal of peer pressure to perform well. The students acquired a tremendous amount of inspiration, as a demand which they put upon themselves. Here the students were excited by themselves and by each other, and were not being dependant on the teacher for motivation or specific encouragement. This was the miracle of utilizing this technique.

I expanded the clapping to make longer measures and to include more intricate rhythms, and the class learned to keep up and do well with these elaborate rhythms. I then added some fun by splitting the room into two parts and having the children clap rondos: First one group, then the other, as a round. We then created more complex, physically demanding activities by involving more than clapping, by incorporating other body parts. I included in the rhythmic structure initially clapping hands, then snapping fingers, and then stamping their feet and patchen, which is slapping the thighs with the hands. Finally, we added the voice. Eventually, I had to devise rhythms and actions which involved all my body parts and the class would have to do the same actions in the same rhythms back to me. It became very intense, a lot of fun, very absorbing, and a challenge - a challenge at which every student wanted to do well.

When this was recognized as the activity the class came to expect, and when everybody was doing well at it, I said, “Now, who can tell me what this is?” And for the first time, I clapped out, from beginning to end, the rhythmic pattern of one of their playground songs. Immediately, the students caught on, and someone shouted, “Hey, that’s ‘Domino’.” The children quickly recognized the songs I clapped, as these songs were part of the everyday world in which they lived. The songs were already a part of the children’s knowledge.

The classroom excitement kept building with each passing day. The children instinctively felt that they were accomplishing something of great importance in their lives. The word was out around the schoolyard - students from other classes would try to hang out in our room to hear and see what was going on. It was tremendously stimulating.

After the class got accustomed to me clapping out the rhythm of the words of their songs, I then split the class into two groups, as we had done earlier. One group would start clapping the song and the other group would come in at the right point, to make a round out of the songs - just to make it complicated, and just to make it fun.

At the conclusion of doing these rounds and having fun in this way a couple of times, I then told the class that I wanted them to write the words to that song. The class was shocked. It had never occurred to them before that they could write the words for something which they already knew. Up to that time, their writing
experience had been made up of dealing with subjects which were foreign and lifeless. Now the paper and the pencils were poised as the students began to think about what they had to do, and they started to write. For the first time, they really cared about how a word was spelled. They wanted to write the song - their song - perfectly. Everyone ran from one person to the other to see who could help them spell a particular word. The students were each, in fact, building his or her own songbook. They were writing out their own poetry. At the end of every week, they had committed that week’s songs and games to memory. They had to write the songs for me, and this became their spelling test. In this way, each student learned how to spell.

At the start, the children were not able to write out the songs which normally they sang. I’d clap out a song - say, “Domino.” The students would guess the name of the song, and I’d say, “Okay, now write it.” The class would start screaming, because how do you spell the word “Domino”? They wanted to know. Some songs contained some very hard words for students of this age, but they really wanted to learn how to spell. The clapping and writing of the songs became their language arts exercise, their spelling exercise, and their reading program.

Before long, we worked on standard English verses of the songs, so when the children wrote the words, they did their best to write in standard English. In effect, in the process of writing the words, the children were translating from Crucian, their native language, to English.

As an art project, each child was given a six-foot length of paper. Then they copied all the words to the songs from the notebooks we’d been keeping, and each child drew pictures; whatever he or she thought would be an appropriate picture. We took these scrolls out in the hallway and taped them to the wall outside the classroom. The other children walking down the hall were captivated by these pictures - the pictures were colorful - then began to realize what they were looking at (only playground songs, not a story from a book!) and they too found that they could read and comprehend the words. Because they could say the words, because they knew the songs, they could read those words. At the end of the year, when I evaluated their reading levels, the children had risen two or three years in their reading level skills. Our activities had that kind of impact. It was a particularly successful teaching method for those children who had been reading below grade level.

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Black History Month All Year Long

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