The kindergartners have just finished their morning routines and are about to go to centers when Barbara asks, “Beatrice, what’s your favorite rap?”

“Rosa Parks.”

“Who else thinks that the Rosa Parks rap is their favorite?” Barbara asks.

Three other children raise their hands. Barbara says, “Please get your rap books from your cubbies and then meet at the red table.” When the children are assembled, Barbara asks them to turn to the Rosa Parks rap: “What letter can you look for at the beginning of the name Rosa to help you find the right rap? When you find it, put your finger on it.”

When all the children identify the uppercase R in the title of the Rosa Parks rap, Barbara distributes red grease pencils and the children circle the letter they found.

**Rap and Young Children: Encouraging Emergent Literacy**

Teachers frequently look for ways to motivate and direct young children’s attention so they can learn about print concepts. Music is an effective way to engage children, and it supports both phonemic awareness and language development (Schön et al. 2008; Bolduc 2009; Trollinger 2010). Similarly, writing and chanting raps can motivate and support young children’s literacy learning.
Rap is a form of rhythmic poetry that entertains and conveys information. In today’s society, rap is often thought of as an expressional art form for adolescents and young adults. Through music and language, rap can support literacy development in early childhood classrooms. Rap can help emergent readers understand print concepts, phrasing, and fluency and gain phonemic awareness. In addition, the unique rhythm and chanting of the rap art form supports the development of oral language skills. Later, as children’s literacy experiences expand and their skills strengthen, rap helps them express their feelings and understandings about the nonfiction literature they have been exposed to, as well as storybooks with which they’ve become familiar.

Purpose-setting for reading is a strategic method that can deepen children’s understanding of biographies. Rap provides a purpose for reading. In the project that Barbara, the first author, led, kindergartners understood that their rapping told a true story about a memorable person (Owocki 2003).

Using rap in the classroom
Barbara, who taught in a predominately African American community, wanted to find a meaningful way to introduce famous African Americans to kindergartners. Through her research she found the book *Young Children Rap to Learn About Famous African-Americans* (1993), by Chris Meissel, a collection of rhymes, raps, and learning activities that introduce preschoolers to notable African Americans. Also included are short biographies of each historical figure and exercises for finding rhyming words, comprehension questions, and relevant follow-up projects.

Creating a rap
The first step in creating a rap is to choose an important and relevant figure who will be of interest to the children. Next, identify, read aloud, and discuss a biography written for children about the person. Then invite the children to find facts about the person, which will be the content of the rap. Write the rap on chart paper and display it in the room.

Choose a relevant historical figure. Barbara began by teaching the children the Martin Luther King Jr. rap from the book to celebrate his birthday. The kindergartners enjoyed the rhythm and rhyme of the words and learned to chant the rap with remarkable speed. When Barbara wanted to discuss the life of Rosa Parks, she turned again to Meissel’s book, but there was no Rosa Parks rap. This was an opportunity to involve the children in creating their first rap!

Learn biographical information. First, Barbara read aloud a children’s biography of Rosa Parks—*Book of Black Heroes From A to Z* (2013), by Wade Hudson and Valerie Wilson Wesley—and led a discussion about what the children learned and what they wanted to remember about her. Barbara wrote the main ideas recalled by the kindergartners on chart paper. Then the class worked together to create a big book using their language and illustrations.

Rap can help emergent readers understand print concepts, phrasing, and fluency and gain phonemic awareness.

The children drew pictures inspired by the Rosa Parks story and dictated their ideas for the book to Barbara, who wrote them on wide sentence strips. They then pasted the sentence strips on large sheets of brown butcher paper. The next step was to cut and paste the illustrations on the butcher paper as well. When the pages were complete, Barbara and the children bound them into a big book and placed it in the class library. Barbara read it to the children daily.

Compose the rap. After creating the big book with the children, Barbara used the children’s language and ideas to write a rap about Rosa Parks. Barbara took the children’s factual sentences from their Rosa Parks big book and consciously put them together in a way that would rhyme. The rhyme dictates the rhythm of the chant.

Rosa, Rosa, stay in your seat.
Don’t get up! Don’t stand on your feet.
You worked real hard like we all do all day.
You’re in your seat, so stay, stay, stay.
You’ll use your feet when you march with Dr. King.
So save your energy for the REAL thing.

The children learned the Rosa Parks rap quickly and enjoyed reciting it.

Display the rap. After writing the rap on large chart paper, Barbara displayed it on a classroom wall. When she found biographies of other people who interested the children, she repeated the process.

Additional raps filled the classroom walls. Once the children were proficient in reciting them, the raps were

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removed from the walls and replaced with new ones. Barbara copied them in a large flip chart tablet so they would all be together. Raps rotated back to the walls throughout the school year, and Barbara encouraged the children to “read the room.” Reading the room included repeated opportunities for practicing directionality, identifying words and sentences, and developing fluency.

When a child led the class in reading a rap, Barbara provided motivational props, such as big lens-free reading glasses and paint stirrers to use as pointers, that supported the children's literacy development. The big eyeglasses helped the children focus on the print, while the paint stirrers aided in one-to-one matching and return sweep—sweeping back to the left on the next line of text so children know where to direct their eyes. The children also used the raps to create a class book to share with each other. It was in the class library, and children could take it home to share it with their families. The smaller rap books remained at the school so the children could continue working on them.

The President Obama rap
Michelle, the fourth author, used the rap-writing process with the prekindergartners she taught. She and Barbara wanted to engage children in learning about President Barack Obama. First, Michelle read aloud the biography Barack Obama: Son of Promise, Child of Hope (2008), by Nikki Grimes. She adapted the book to make it age appropriate and guided a class discussion using the book's illustrations and the children's comments about what the illustrations depicted. On chart paper, Michelle recorded some main ideas the children said they learned about President Obama.

- When Barack Obama was little, he was called Barry
- His mom was white and his dad was black
- When he was little he lived in Hawaii
- Barry's parents got divorced, and he was sad when his dad moved away
- His mom taught him the golden rule: be honest, be fair, and be kind
- Barack went to college and law school
- He became a US senator from the state of Illinois
- He wrote new laws that helped others have a better chance
- Barack Obama became the 44th president of the United States

Based on the children's recollections, Barbara and Michelle put some of the facts together and made them rhyme. They wrote the following rap about Barack Obama for the children to chant:

#44 #44, President Obama opened the door.
He opened the door of opportunity.
Opportunity for kids like you and me.
There's nothing in the world that we can't do or be!

Michelle worked with the children to compile a Barack Obama big book.

Developing language and literacy skills using rap
It is important to help young children develop their oral language skills, expand their vocabularies, and understand print concepts. Since children enjoy raps, teachers can use this format to support young children's emergent literacy development.

Print concepts
What power did these raps hold? How did the children learn them so quickly? Just as they can easily learn the words to songs they like, children incorporate the rhythms and rhymes of the raps in their memories. As Marie Clay (1991) tells us,

A young child does well in memorizing a connected text—nursery rhymes, stories, and fairy tales. In this case, along with the number of repetitions, a number of conditions are present that favor memorizing, such as:

- emotional content of the text
- clear images
- evocation of empathy
- rhythm of speech and rhythm of body movement, which facilitates the construction of a verbal–motor image
- memorable play on words (62–63)

With this in mind, Barbara knew she could use rap to teach children concepts about print.

Spoken word–written word correspondence. Clay (2013) states that “when a child understands what to attend to, in what order, and a few things about the shapes and positions of letters and words, this opens other doors to literacy learning” (42). Barbara began by using the President Obama rap, posted on the wall, to model for the children how to match each spoken word to the corresponding print.

The read-the-room center became the classroom's most popular learning center. Small groups of children waited patiently for a turn to read in unison. Because the children enjoyed the raps so much, they quickly learned to imitate Barbara's behavior. A self-appointed child would grasp the paint stirrer to be ready to lead the group in reciting a rap, pointing to the words as the children read them. The children were learning concepts about print by reading the room!
word as they said it. She moved the pointer to help the children develop directionality and one-to-one matching as they repeated the rap in unison. Then it was the children’s turn to use the pointer: every day they flocked to the read-the-room center, eager to don the eyeglass frames and use the pointer as they read the rap.

Letter knowledge and phonemic awareness. Next, Barbara printed out and laminated a set of raps for each child. Each rap had its own page, and Barbara bound the children's collections into a book for each child, using small loose-leaf rings. She formed reading groups based on children's favorite raps and asked them to find words that began with the same sound as the rap subjects’ names. For example, for the Harriet Tubman rap Barbara asked the children to find every uppercase H and mark it on the rap in their books with a grease pencil. Barbara continued to use rap as a tool for helping children develop letter knowledge and phonemic awareness skills. She introduced new alphabet letters and their accompanying sounds with each new rap (e.g., the letter A for Arthur Ashe, B for Benjamin Banneker, and M and G for Marcus Garvey).

Sight words and high-frequency words. When the children used their knowledge of letters and sounds, they learned a number of words in the raps. Eventually, the high-frequency words became sight words for the children. As their sight vocabulary grew, they searched the raps for specific words and marked them in their individual books. When Barbara asked groups to find a high-frequency word (e.g., the, and, to, a), she first asked what letter they thought the word began with. Then she had the children find the word in a page in their collections and put a finger under it. When everyone had found the word (some children needed a friend's help), they marked it on the laminated page with a grease pencil, underlining it or putting a circle, square, triangle, or rectangle around it.

As children recognized more and more words from the raps, they wanted them written down. Barbara gave each child a key ring on which she had put a large cutout of a key with the child’s name on it. At times during the school day, children asked to have words added to their key rings. Barbara wrote the words that the children wanted to learn on keys made from oak tag paper and added them to the key rings. The kindergartners drew pictures on the backs to remind them of the word on the front and shared their words during center time, taking turns reading the key words to each other.

The children's ability to read was not limited to the raps. The phonemic awareness and sight words they learned from the rap groups transferred to finding familiar sounds and words in the environment. This became apparent as the children pointed out high-frequency words on hallway bulletin boards.

Vocabulary

Primary classrooms need to be “word-rich” places. The aim is to establish an environment that builds rich and varied connections among words for children. The more words children understand and the deeper their knowledge of those words, the bigger the payoff as they go through both elementary and secondary schools.

—Junko Yokota and William H. Teale, “Beginning Reading and Writing Perspectives on Instruction”

It is important for teachers to expose children to rich vocabulary beginning in early childhood classes. Understanding the meaning of many words helps support reading comprehension. The kindergarten children Barbara taught could explain words such as escape, real, and energy because she did not teach such words in isolation—the words were always relevant to what the class was studying at the time, which made them more learnable. “Because most vocabulary is learned from context, making it a regular practice to read aloud to students from well-chosen pieces of prose and poetry, both fiction and nonfiction, provides a gold mine for building word consciousness” (Graves & Watts-Taffe 2008, 187). The children used the words from the raps in their...
day-to-day vocabulary. For example, after learning about Harriet Tubman and talking about how brave she was, the children transferred the meaning of brave from the rap to describe firefighters, police officers, and animal trainers at the circus!

When Michelle discussed the President Obama rap with the preschool children, she asked them what opportunity meant. No one knew. It was not an easy meaning to convey, but by finding times throughout the day to highlight the use of opportunity (e.g., mentioning to the children that they have the opportunity to eat lunch on schedule or to delay it in order to finish a story), the concept of substituting a chance or a choice for the word opportunity began to sink in. Michelle knew that 4-year-old Jordan got it when, in the middle of reading a story, Michelle noticed that it was time to pack up to go home. When she told the children that they had to stop and get ready to leave, Jordan called out, “Oh, no we don’t, Mrs. Bloom. We don’t have to stop now. We have an opportunity to stop and get ready quicker or choose to finish!”

Oral language

Young children’s language develops more rapidly when they have frequent conversations with peers and especially with adults (Clay 1998; Zimmerman et al. 2009). Teachers can provide settings for such interactions. Barbara arranged the read-the-room center so that children could talk with each other and the teacher not only to facilitate their learning of print concepts but also to foster conversations. Through interactions with others, children learn the rules of conversation (e.g., turn taking, listening) and the syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic aspects of language.

Learning raps was another opportunity for children to develop oral language skills through conversations.

Children developed the raps by retelling facts they gleaned from biographies the teacher read aloud in class. Learning raps was another opportunity for children to develop oral language skills through conversations with classmates, with the teacher, and with their families. “As we talk to a child he revises and refines his language, experimenting, making funny errors but gaining all the while in control over the expressiveness and the complexity of the language” (Clay 1991, 69).

Jenny, a 4-year-old in Michelle’s class, had been quiet since the school year began in September. Michelle and Barbara introduced the rap project in February. After learning the Obama rap, Jenny initiated a conversation with Michelle: “I told my mom I was singing the Barack Obama song!” Before this, Jenny had never started a conversation with her teacher. When Barbara visited the classroom, Jenny engaged her in conversation as well. The rap was so exciting and fun for Jenny that, in addition to rapping the piece, she wanted to talk about it. Jenny’s self-initiated conversations became a way for Michelle to evaluate her learning. It was evident that rapping was an effective strategy for Jenny because it gave her something to talk about and made her feel comfortable enough to engage in conversation. This momentous experience could be used as a bridge between home and school when planning Jenny’s future instruction.

Reciting the raps helped the children develop oral fluency. The teacher modeled how a rap should sound, and the children were motivated to spend time repeating the rap. The time spent practicing helped the children work on their phrasing, fluency, and intonation.

Conclusion

Contributing to the construction of raps and learning to recite them introduced the children to many important literacy skills. When creating the raps, they retold details from the story. They learned the conventions of conversations: to listen and take turns. Chanting the raps contributed to phrasing, fluency, intonation, and rhythm in speech.
the raps and the big book supported the children in learning concepts about print. They learned to identify the front of a book and began to track print from left to right and from top to bottom. They learned the difference between a letter and a word. They were able to find the first letters and last letters of words, and they began to scan words from left to right. They made some letter–sound links and began to identify words. Over time, many children became emergent readers.

Every child in the class found success on one level or another. Due to the daily repetition, all the children could recite each rap and took pride in their accomplishments. The project’s effects went beyond the classroom. Families informed Michelle that the children came home and rapped to them. Parents asked if the children were performing in the assembly and commented on how excited their children were about the rap and what they learned about President Obama.

The Parents Association asked Barbara’s class to perform at their monthly evening meeting. We announced in the family newsletter that the kindergartners would do a recital, which drew a record turnout. It was rewarding for both families and children, and it further encouraged the children in their reading and language development.

References


