I am an elementary music teacher. As a music teacher, it is my responsibility to pass on to students in my classes a love and appreciation of the arts. I also understand the importance of supporting regular education teachers and their efforts to teach students to read. It is easy to integrate reading into the songs I teach the students. In the article, Making Music, Reaching Readers: Making Powerful Connections Possible for Young Students, D’Agrosa (2008) writes about music and reading connections. According to D’Agrosa, capitalizing on the connections between music and reading and intentionally including them in lessons can be a powerful tool in educating the whole child and may improve reading scores. D’Agrosa found that reading connections have a natural connection to learning and creating music. Musical connections to reading include pre-reading skills, such as phonological awareness, syllabification, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension.

Pre-reading skills include listening and speaking, which are usually developed before reading and writing (D’Agrosa, 2008). The kindergarten students quickly learn my classroom routines. When I introduce the kindergartners to a new song, they always echo each phrase of the song. After echoing phrases, I move on to the whole song where I sing the entire song alone; then the class sings the entire song together with me. Students need to listen carefully so they can sing the correct pitches of the melody and the correct words of each phrase.

I frequently incorporate books in my music classes. Many of these books are from The Song Box. Some of my favorite books from The Song Box are Miss Mary Mack (1994), Down by the Bay (1990), and Over in the Meadow (1995). I display these books on an easel since they are also big books, and the students can follow along with me as I read. I always read the words when we look at the book the first time, and then I sing the words in the book during the second book reading. Many students like to read or sing the words in the book with me. I highly encourage this behavior. I also like to tell my students, “In music, our books are singing books.”

Phonological Awareness

Phonological awareness is “an awareness that words consists of syllables, onsets, and rimes” (Zeece, 2006, p. 169). Students can learn phonological awareness in music by identifying and making oral rhymes which are an important part of reading and music. Most songs and poems include words that rhyme. My second through fifth grade students often learn a song by looking at the words in the music. I tell my students they need to follow along with their eyes as they initially listen to a song. I always take time to talk about the words that rhyme in the song for my elementary students, which includes the rhythmic and melodic flow of the song. With my younger students, I write the rhyming words on the smart board. Next we spell the words together as a group. Even if the kindergartners do not know how to read the word just yet, it is a great way to practice sound recognition as
well as being tuned into the words that rhyme. The kindergarten and first grade students also practice saying the rhyming words, and I discuss how the words have the same ending sounds. For example, I often take a song the class is working on and create a PowerPoint. This is fun because I can also add color and pictures. I point to the words as we sing the song or choose a student to point to the words as the class sings the song.

**Syllabification**

One of my favorite books, *Down by the Bay* (1990), has several verses, but it is also fun for the younger classes to create many more verses to this rhyming song. My older students take poems they have written, and I teach them to integrate the poetry into music by breaking the words into parts or syllables. For example, the word *watermelon* in the song *Down by the Bay* has four syllables and can be sung using four eighth notes. The students write the rhythms to go with their poem, eventually add a melody, and then their poem is a song.

**Fluency**

Fluency is the ability to read a text accurately and quickly. Fluent readers read aloud effortlessly and with expression (Goudvis & Harvey, 2000). Students are taught to expressively sing or perform the rhythmic poems in music. I model to my classes how a song should be sung, and the students imitate my expressive singing. After listening to a song several times, they become familiar with the words to the song. This familiarity allows the students to sing along with more understanding and with more expression. Many children who have trouble speaking or singing alone feel comfortable speaking and singing orally with others. Reviewing and practicing the words in the song several times gives these students the opportunity to feel more at ease and more confident with their musical reading. As my students prepare for a school program, I remind them of the importance of knowing the music well. We spend many weeks practicing and polishing songs so the students know the words of each song and are able to sing the songs with expression. Singing with expression not only includes helping the students become more familiar with the words, but it also includes other aspects of music such as tempo and dynamics.

**Vocabulary**

Vocabulary is the words we must know in order to communicate more effectively (D’Agrosa, 2000). Whenever my students practice songs for a school performance, I always break the songs down phrase by phrase and discuss the meaning. It is easier to sing or read words when the students already understand the meaning. When my students perform, I want them to effectively communicate to their audience. This is accomplished when the students completely understand what they are singing.

**Comprehension**

My students often tell a story during their musical performances. In between songs, I have students go to the microphone for speaking parts. I share with my students that the songs in the program also help to tell the story along with the speaking parts. Songs have more meaning if students understand the words, the context, and the history of the songs (D’Agrosa, 2008). For instance, many of the songs learned in music class are folk songs, patriotic songs, and holiday songs. These kinds of songs often include language that is unfamiliar to the students. Our national anthem is a perfect example of a song that can be difficult for students in elementary school to understand. In order for my students to fully comprehend the meaning of the song, I tell them the story of the writer of the song, Frances Scott Key. Then we analyze the song phrase by phrase and discuss what he may have pictured in his mind while writing this poem. As the students become more familiar with the
vocabulary in the songs we sing, they sing with a greater appreciation and understanding of the music.

Conclusion
Music teachers integrate reading into their curriculum every day. As a music teacher, I believe it is my responsibility to teach reading alongside my music curriculum. I believe it is important for students to fully appreciate the music we learn in class. They need to understand the basics of the songs, which include early reading skills such as phonological awareness, syllabification, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. I am a partner in education with the classroom teachers in my school. There are many students who may have difficulty reading, but many of these same students absolutely love music. It is my goal to be a teacher who encourages a love of reading and a love for music. Reading and music goes hand in hand.

References

Call for Manuscripts
Do you have a passion for academic writing?
Do you enjoy staying at the top of the field of literacy when it comes to literacy research and best practices?
Would you want to contribute your expertise and support the field of literacy by becoming a writer for The Missouri Reader?

If you are interested in becoming a writer for The Missouri Reader please send your manuscript to jfox@sbuniv.edu for consideration.
In the subject line please use the key words: MO READER manuscript submission