Adding to our Bag of Tricks! By Lori Stephens

The strong push for formal assessments and mastery of skills right now has made me reflect on what exactly I’m accomplishing in the classroom. Which strategies and lesson plans are working and which do I need to revamp? One area of my SLO this year is focusing on kindergarten singing voices. I wanted to be prepared with a variety of teaching strategies that would help me achieve the results I need by the end of the year. So I contacted a number of my colleagues and asked them for some suggestions of what to do to help a young student find his/her singing voice. There’s bound to be a few ideas you haven’t tried, so copy this article or bookmark the journal and keep it handy for when you have one of those days when nothing is working. We all like to have a few extra tricks in our bag! A big thank you goes out to the music professionals who shared their great ideas with us!

**When a young student is not finding his/her singing voice easily, I try…**

\*A big yawn and stretch with a vocal slide high to low

\*Vocal slides down and up like we are on a roller coaster

\*Speak Ho Ho Ho (deep chest voice) like Santa, Ha Ha Ha in kindergarten voice, and Hee Hee Hee ( light head voice) like Santa's elf.

*(Mary Villani, Hollidaysburg Area School District)*

\*to ask them to imagine like their voice is coming out of the top of their head instead of their mouth.

\*to mimic how they sound (chest voice) and then give them a head voice example.

*(Teri Myers, Altoona Area School District)*

\*I tell them a story of a baby owl in the top of a tall tree.  He falls out and the sound he makes on the way down is :Whoooooooooooooo!

\*We listen to "Yodeling the Classics" by Mary Schneider.

*(Tom Nagy, Central Cambria School District)*

\*letting them experiment with sounds - like a cowboy yee haw, a fire siren, a sound that moves up and down - if they can't or won't experiment with sounds they may not want to experiment with their voice.  Try giving them a puppet or stuffed animal to pretend with.

\*We talk about their voice doing four things:  singing, whispering, talking, shouting

We make all those sounds and sing a song about those voices. I emphasize that everyone has a voice that can sing/talk/whisper/shout.

\*We play a game called Simon Sings - when the teacher uses his/her singing voice the students do the requested activity, if teacher uses speaking/whispering/shouting voice the students do not do the requested activity.

\*I ask students to sing alone and in small groups in kindergarten and all other grades - I don't think you can hear which students are using their singing voice if you only sing in a large group.   They get used to the idea that I want to hear their singing voice alone.  If a student refuses to sing, I ask the class to sing their part.  (I have very few students who will not sing alone) After a few weeks, I begin to give them feedback after I hear their voice.

For example: ~ I love hearing your singing voice. ~Thank you for trying today.

~ You are still speaking but I know you have a singing voice.

\*Sometimes a simple lifting of the eyebrows can help a student.

*(Martha Miller, Hollidaysburg Area School District)*

\* Having the child sing siren sounds with me, following the motion of my hand, moving from a low pitch to high one, and back down again on the syllable “whoo.”

\*Having the child echo tonal patterns on a neutral syllable  - asking them to concentrate on their singing and use their muscles to make the sound come out.

\*Having children echo major and minor tonal patterns (on neutral syllables or solfège syllables) individually, on a regular basis.

*(Christine Black, St. Rose of Lima School)*

I also found lots of good ideas in the materials I had sitting on my bookshelves. For example:

\*There was a neat lesson plan in the October/November 2008 issue of Activate by Loretta Mitchell called “Make a Sound”. The short song encourages individual students to make sounds (cat’s meow, cow’s moo, buzz, any kind of sound) and then the class echoes the sound and the song starts again. I thought this would be extra helpful for the more bashful students.

\*John Feierabend’s First Steps in Music offer a number of pitch exploration activities. One of my favorites is probably the poem “All right!”. I say a silly poem and at the end of each line the kids either say “All right!” in their high Micky Mouse voice when something favorable happens or “Oh no!” in their low bullfrog voice when something goes wrong. I extend it by letting volunteers share their own good news (“All right!”) and bad news (“Oh no!”).

\*A past student teacher had this great toy that he brought in for a vocal warm up. It was a plastic propeller UFO Disk Toy (google it!). He would ask the kids to follow the disk with their voices and then he’d set it off. The disk would spin into the air, hover and then float down to the ground. Sounds like an outside toy, but it wasn’t dangerous, I promise. The kids loved it.

Well, the list could go on and on. I can’t wait to try them all! Now I feel completely equipped with an arsenal of tricks to have my kindergarteners singing like angels. Wish me luck. I hope you can make use of the ideas, too. And if you’re in need of tricks for some other area, remember that you can ask your colleagues for help!