Keeping the Joy in Storytime: Dismantling Racism in Storytime Songs

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First, a warning:

This session will include discussions of racism, racist content, language, and imagery. We have been careful to only include examples that we feel are necessary to explain the history of racism tied to the songs we will discuss.

This content is difficult to engage with and may be emotionally triggering. Please take care and take breaks if needed. Our slides and resource guide will be shared with all participants after this session.
Let’s start with Hello!
The Path that Led us to this work

INTEREST
WORKSHOPS/TRAININGS
RESEARCH
DISCUSSION
ACTION
Community Agreements

- Impact > Intent
- Perfection is not the goal
- Lean into Discomfort
- Keep an open mind
- Take care of yourself
Objectives

Participants can expect to learn:

1. The importance of evaluating storytime songs with the same critical lens used to evaluate books and stories.

2. Some of the history of popular storytime songs and tunes with racist origins.

3. Ideas and examples on how we’re moving forward by rethinking storytime songs, discovering new and contemporary songs to sing, and reclaiming favorite songs with new tunes.
Is it important to evaluate storytime songs?
When we teach music, we teach a subject that incorporates cultural, social, and expressive elements. A song carries with it the history of the person who wrote it or transmitted it. A song provides a window into the past, whether that be an angst-filled love song, an angry call for change, or a song that tells of a historical conflict. If we want to categorize something as part of a canon, then we must justify its inclusion based on the entirety of the song and not exclude aspects that may be difficult to address or based on our ignorance; otherwise, we become complicit.

Equity in Music Education: Exclusionary Practices in Music Education
Jacqueline Kelly-McHale
Why evaluate storytime songs?

Every storytime is a platform

- We feel a professional responsibility to critically engage with the storytime material we share.
- Songs are stories, and should receive no less discernment than books and other materials we share at storytime.
- The stories & songs we share are messages that communicate ideas and values to our communities. It is important to evaluate both our intent and the potential impact.
How we’re evaluating storytime songs

1. Draw from our experience evaluating books
2. Avoid harmful stereotypes and biases
3. Trace the origin: consider original time period and author/use.
4. Look to music education resources
5. Consult trusted colleagues
6. When in doubt, leave it out
7. Stay open and humble -- remember that we won’t always get it right and that’s okay!
Questions to ask when choosing storytime songs

Do I know enough about this song to use it in my program?

How does this song foster community?

How will sharing this song benefit my community?

How is this song culturally inclusive?

Have I researched this song to rule out harmful stereotypes or biases?
Songs & Rhymes We’ll Discuss:

- Shortnin’ Bread
- Ten Little Indians
- Five Little Monkeys
- Turkey in the Straw
- Do Your Ears Hang Low
Links Between Songs

Shortnin' Bread

Ten Little Indians

Five Little Monkeys Jumping on a Bed

Five Little Monkeys Swinging in a Tree
Shortnin’ Bread

- First version of the song was written by James Whitcomb Riley in 1900
- Early versions of the song were about enslaved people starving and used derogatory terms.
- Songs that use this tune include:
  - Hello Little Babies
  - Baby, Put Your Pants On
  - The Vegetable Soup Song
  - Mama’s Little Baby Loves Dancing
Ten Little Indians

- Originally titled: "Ten Little Injuns" and written by Septimus Winner in 1868.
- Became a staple in minstrel shows
- Variations of the song include racial slurs
- Songs that use this tune include:
  - Bumping Up and Down in My Little Red Wagon
  - Hurry, Hurry, Drive the Fire Truck
  - Dump Truck song
  - Bubble, Bubble, Bubble, Pop
Five Little Monkeys
Jumping on the Bed/Swinging in the Tree

- The song has similar lyrics and tune to the first verse of the 1890s folk song Shortnin’ Bread.
- Monkeys and apes have often been used as stand-in characters for Black people.
- Some versions include racial slurs.
- “Alligator bait” was a practice of using young black children to catch alligators.
Turkey in the Straw

- Turkey in the Straw: 19th fold song from the traditional British song “The (Old) Rose Tree”
- Appropriated by blackface minstrel shows in 1820s, given new lyrics and titled “Zip Coon.”
- Same tune as the later “Do your Ears Hang Low” (next slide)
Do Your Ears Hang Low

- Harry C. Browne wrote a version entitled “[N-word] Love a Watermelon Ha! Ha! Ha!”, in 1916
- Minstrel tunes played in ice cream parlors, a century later the tune is used as the jingle for ice cream trucks.
- Sanitized version of: “Do your balls hang low?”
- Songs that use this tune include:
  - The Elevator song
  - The Subway song
  - The Ocean song
  - Put Your Hands Up High
It is important to recognize the impact racism has had on our country, even, perhaps especially, when it hides in the nooks and crannies of wholesome Americana. When black people hear and see those stereotyped presentations of blackness, we are told how America viewed us. And that has lasting, tangible effects. There can be no honest conversation on race issues today without an appreciation for this. It matters.

Why might it be difficult to let go of these songs?
What are we doing now?
What we’re doing (and you can too!)

Discuss & Listen

- Continue to discuss in professional settings - speak to colleagues, managers, and administrators within your institution.
- Discuss with others working in the space of early childhood education: music educators, teachers, writers, bloggers, & fellow librarians.
- Have discussions with staff about songs they use in storytime. Do the same with any performers the library hires.
- Recognize that perfection is not the goal. We may discover that other songs we sing have problematic histories. If a colleague/patron/community member lets us know, we will listen, learn, and do better.
What we’re doing (and you can too!)

Learn & Evaluate

- Audit songs we sing and recommend at programs. Research the history, learn what we can and make professional, social justice-minded decisions on what to use/promote, and what to leave behind.

- Learn about the diverse artists in contemporary children’s music. Share their songs, purchase and play their music.
What we’re doing (and you can too!)

Get Creative

Speak to colleagues, family, & friends to find new songs to sing

Keep the lyrics but find a new tune that doesn’t offend anyone. We hope!
Training/Workshop Resources

Sing, rhyme, and create with Ingrid Christina.
Email
singrhymeplay@gmail.com
Contact Us

- Amber Moller - ambermoller@nypl.org
- Annie Lin - annielin@nypl.org
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Thank You!