

# Re-Examining Repertoire Choices

## Introduction

Many of us teaching music in the United States grew up with a canon of songs and games we learned from the playground, home, media, and our own music teachers. These pieces have been considered part of the fabric of American children's music traditions, holding a place close to the hearts of many educators. Though there has been song research throughout the history of American music education, it is only recently that the greater community has turned its attention to critically contextualizing the roots of these songs, and how they have been included in curricula over time, against the racism embedded in our country's history, in efforts to create not only inclusive and multicultural, but antiracist classroom spaces.

What we are discovering as we continue to reflect upon our repertoire choices is that behind the melodies, rhythms, and games, there are sometimes origins deeply rooted in racism and bigotry. This has led our education community to a sort of reckoning: if we know that a harmful history birthed a song, or perhaps is a big part of how it gained its popularity, continuing to use the song contradicts our vow to educate children from every background with empathy and respect.

## Critical Reflection of Repertoire Choices

Why is it important to consider our repertoire in this way? Let us ask ourselves, "Whose stories are we telling in our classrooms? Whose lived experiences and viewpoints are we highlighting? Are they the experiences and viewpoints of all students, or just of the most dominant and mainstream groups represented in American culture?"

Our education system is rooted in traditions much more culturally homogenous than the population that exists in society. The system places white Western European and white American music traditions in center focus, and others on the periphery- sometimes rendering them completely invisible. The majority of publishers, content creators, and educators promoted in music education have foundations in this dominant culture. As a result, those points-of-view are given more weight than others.

One such example in mainstream classroom resources is "Jump Jim Joe". A teacher can focus on the joy and fun they derive from "Jump Jim Joe" as they continue singing and playing it with students, completely ignoring - either through ignorance or intention - that Black educators, students, and families may descend from people who watched entertainers dress up in blackface and sing the original "Jump Jim Crow" and later were forced to live under the system of American apartheid that was maintained by Jim Crow Laws. My Black ancestors were present during this time, and my own parents were alive during legal segregation, so the negative connection for me of using that song for singing and playing in the general music classroom is strong. My experiences as a Black American, however, are non-dominant and usually the "joy and fun" win, and the song remains. Songs like "Jump Jim Joe" have been whitewashed. Whitewashing is the interpretation of events through the dominant narrative, prioritizing it over that of marginalized groups. As a result, facts get hidden or excluded from history. The reckoning we have reached, that we can see mirrored in a range of things from educational policy down to our everyday interactions, is changing this result.

## Healthy Conversations Surrounding the Need for Change

My meeting of Roger Sams is an example of this change. I launched the website of my organization, Decolonizing the Music Room, in June 2019. One of my first articles was on the background of "Johnny on the Woodpile," which has been used as text of pieces in a couple of curricula, including Purposeful Pathways. My research pointed to an almost undeniable connection between the text and the idiom "n\*gger on the woodpile," and its variant "n\*gger on the fence." The idiom had been in fashion for decades during the 1800s and 1900s, being used as recently as the last decade from a British government

official when speaking publicly to the press. Dr. Seuss had used the idiom alongside racist imagery in his advertisement work, and there had been a popular string band song of the same name with much of the same text recorded by prominent Georgia stringband The Skillet Lickers.

Unbeknownst to me, Roger read my article that summer and was deeply concerned with the implications of keeping that text in his and Beth Ann Hepburn's book. He reached out to me and we sat down together later in the summer to talk about it. He expressed a fear that I have seen from many educators who worry about inadvertently perpetuating racism and bigotry and want to be part of the solution. For Roger, keeping the text was not even an option. As we talked it seemed to me as if he was facing the shift in perception of much music that is dear to the heart of the music education community, and processing through what necessary changes would mean for the work moving forward.

## Towards New Choices

There have been some common questions that have come up from educators when we talk of letting go of these pieces for general music purposes: How else will I teach certain melodic and rhythmic elements, if not through these songs? Why should I have to remove songs I love from my classroom? Aren't we just whitewashing history?

To the question of teaching elements - We have a huge body of songs from within cultures of this land and the world. There are so many options for teaching pedagogical elements, but it will now be a matter of digging in for our own research and connecting with others to broaden our song collections.

To the question of removing songs that we love - When there is music we love, it is hard to let go of it, but it is possible to acknowledge that something gave you joy, yet potentially creates pain for others and that it does not belong in spaces where it can create pain. It is selfish to consider our sadness in removing a song from that context as more important than the oppression of those around us. Our students, their families, and our colleagues deserve that consideration.

To the question of whitewashing history - history has already been whitewashed. Whitewashing is how the racist roots of songs and rhymes have managed to be mostly obscured up to this point. Some songs weren't born of racism, but were used in racist context and that context is the very reason that the songs gained popularity and made its way into the elementary music canon.

## Moving Forward with Intent to Change

So what do we do now? Once we know better, we have a responsibility to do better. I am grateful to see the creators of Purposeful Pathways aren't just talking the talk. They are walking the walk and are replacing lessons that cause harm. Not only does this make the community a more inclusive space, it models that even through fear we have an obligation to process this new information, consider viewpoints we never had to before, and reach out to others in our community to work together and improve our practices. The work will continue far beyond these lessons. Each month it feels like there is something new to learn that requires a revisiting of what we considered to be the norm. But there is joy and love in doing this work together, knowing that our students will benefit because of it.



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The authors, Roger Sams and BethAnn Hepburn, and the Music Is Elementary team are in the midst of a learning and growth process, as is all of our culture, including music education. We are grateful to Brandi for her support as we expand the possibilities in our books and in the classrooms that utilize these materials. We are committed to participating in the process of positive change and are invested in examining the repertoire that has long been considered core literature in our profession. We will be creating new lessons to teach the same musical content and removing resources we have learned have harmful history. We will be offering these replacement lessons to all, free of charge, along with the accompanying electronic visuals. This will be an ongoing process as we critically examine the repertoire and learn new information. We look forward to the continued growth of our profession as we embrace the wisdom of Maya Angelou, "Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better." We hope to do better and be a part of positive change.

Currently, these are the lessons/songs that we are replacing or altering in our materials.



#### **Purposeful Pathways 1:**

Lucy Locket - Replace with Sneaky Fox  
Johnny on the Woodpile - Replace with Sing and Dance Together  
Counting Out Rhymes – Delete Eeny, Meeny, Miny, Moe  
from the Pathway to Orchestration



#### **Purposeful Pathways 2:**

Who's That Tapping at the Window? - Replace with World of Books



#### **Purposeful Pathways 3:**

Dinah  
Chicken on a Fencepost  
John Kanaka  
Yangtze River Chantey



#### **Purposeful Pathways 4:**

Sandy Land  
Cindy, Cindy













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# Sing and Dance Together

**RHYTHM**  
Introduce

**MELODY**  
so • mi  
la • do

## PATHWAY TO **Rhythm**: Quick reaction game using

- Lead class on an instrument that can play up to half note duration, such as a gong or finger cymbals. Establish the steady beat, students walking.
- Establish the steady beat, students walking.
- Explore alternating  and  in **4-beat echo patterns**, teacher plays, then students move. Example:     → step pause step pause
- Back to quarter note pulse, add the half note duration.
- Encourage students to show the sustained motion throughout their movement, like walking on the moon, or pulling their foot out of gum they stepped upon.
- Practice new 4-beat patterns, containing    

## PATHWAY TO **Literacy**: Practice reading rhythms with

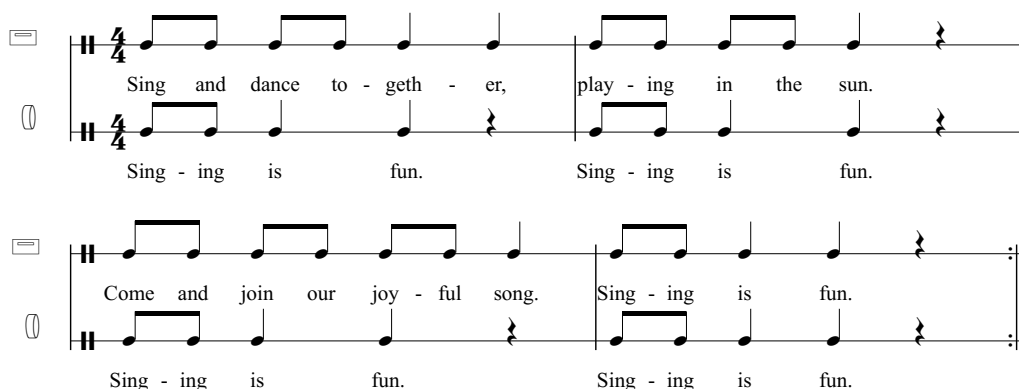
- Students read rhythm from visual.
- Add text.

## PATHWAY TO **Partwork**: Speech to UTP

- Turn the last measure of the poem into an accompaniment **ostinato**.

### Sing and Dance Together

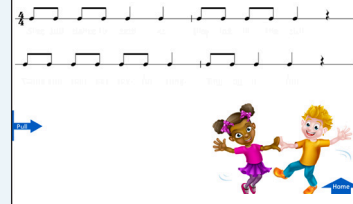
Hepburn/Sams



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- Practice as a two-part speech piece.
- Transfer poem to woodblock and **ostinato** to hand drum.

#### Sing and Dance Together



Rhythm

#### Sing and Dance Together



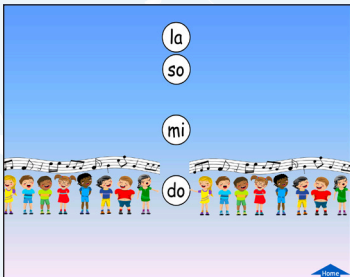
Text



Promethean

ActivInspire

# Sing and Dance Together, cont.



Solfa tone ladder



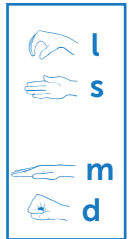
Melody



Create a Dance  
(Not in lesson plan)

## PATHWAY TO *Literacy*: so mi la do and introduce half note

- Review rhythm and text.
- Prepare the students for the pitch vocabulary using the **solfa tone ladder**.
- Students read melody from **solfa** notation using solfa with hand signs. Use the **solfa tone ladder** as a support as needed.
- Review the placement of the pitches on the staff.
- Students sing the melody using solfa syllables and hand signs, while reading from the staff.
- Students sing the melody with text while reading from the score
- Lead the students into discovering that "sun" and "fun" are more beautiful when you let the tone sustain for two beats. Support student learning by using a sustained gesture to physically demonstrate the sustained tone.
- Introduce half note, converting the quarter note and rest into a half note.



## PATHWAY TO *Partwork*: Melody with ostinato

- Teach ostinato by rote.

### Sing and Dance Together

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- Students sing in two parts.
- See the electronic visuals for support in creating dances together.