

ONLINE SONG RESEARCH

Tools for the Reflective Teacher



by Kathy Kuddes

One of the unique features of being a music educator, at any level, is the role of teacher as curator. Music teachers regularly select the repertoire that will be the central instructional content for each grade level or ensemble. This means making thoughtful decisions about what materials will, and will not, be shared with students. With growing interest and concern around the historical contexts of some standards of the pedagogical repertoire, it is a fundamental responsibility of each teacher to acquire some skills as a song researcher.

Researching Repertoire

Given the long list of other required topics, most music teacher preparation programs do not include the study of anthropology, musicology, or ethnomusicology in the degree plan. As a result, music educators are placed in the vulnerable position of curating a classroom repertoire without adequate training to discern what Dr. Constance McKoy calls the “cultural accuracy” of musical materials.¹ Until recently, this sort of research meant either acquiring many primary source materials for one’s own collection, or many laborious hours in the stacks of a music library. With the many online resources available today, teachers can do more quality research during the repertoire selection process from home or school.

Selecting Reliable Sources

While discussions on social media platforms may cause music educators to think more critically about the song selections they are making, it is imperative that claims made in such posts be fully vetted before making a final decision about the usage of “songs with a questionable past.”² Whether online, or in a physi-

cal collection, the reliability of material is based on the quality of the source(s). Many online posts and blogs lack reference citations and often simply repeat unsubstantiated information from other online sources. My intent here is to provide only the basics of this sort of work and is focused primarily on resources for materials in English of mostly Anglo-British traditions (my personal heritage). While the steps recommended here hold true, the websites or materials used to verify song histories from other linguistic or cultural origins should be modified accordingly.

Tracking Your Research

Because research of this sort can send you chasing down numerous rabbit holes, I recommend you start a document and label it with the song title. Copy and paste the URL of every resource you uncover related to that song. If you are looking at a hard copy or digitized book, capture the text’s bibliographic information (including the page numbers) in case you need to return to that resource in the future. Snip an image of any song notation, collect all verses, game directions, and, most importantly, any background or source material provided. The first source you find will likely lead you to another, and then another, and onward into deeper knowledge.

How Much Is Enough?

Once you start searching, it can be difficult to know when to stop. There is no firm rule of thumb, but clearly a single reference should never be considered conclusive. The more independent corroborating evidence that can be found, the stronger the case for the accuracy of the information. I prefer to err on the side of too much information to build confidence that I have tracked down a

substantive amount of solid documentation on a given song. As an example, what follows is a condensed outline of work I completed on one rhyme.

Two, Four, Six, Eight
Two, Four, Six, Eight,
Meet me at the garden gate.
If you're late, I won't wait.
Two, Four, Six, Eight.

My first source for this rhyme was *The Jump Rope Book* by Julie C. Harris.³ No instructions or source material was provided in this little book I picked up in a souvenir shop in Mississippi one summer. In workshops and other settings, I have heard this rhyme with a slightly varied third line: “If I’m late, please don’t wait,” but I had no documented source for this text.

Being an English-language rhyme, I began with a search of the Roud Folk Song Index. Entering numerals for the rhyme text yielded one source with a variant text. Spelling out the numbers resulted in five more sources and two additional variants of the text.

2, 4, 6, 8, Mary sat at the cottage gate . . .
Two, Four, Six, Eight, Who do we appreciate . . .
Two, Four, Six, Eight, Mary at the cottage gate . . .

The earliest source found here was a newspaper column from the *South Wales Daily News*⁴ about “Counting-Out Rhymes” dated 1893. A scan of the clipping was included and it presented this version of the rhyme:

Two, Four, Six, Eight, Mary at the cottage gate,
Eating cherries off the plate, Two, Four, Six, Eight.

This article immediately raised the question whether this rhyme was originally for jumping rope or for counting out (eliminating players or selecting “it” for playing).

The Roud Index provides only the source citations and typically not the actual source material. The newspaper column was an unusual find. The other sources suggested were searched for using the tools discussed below. One led to an audio recording of two children chanting for their favorite Irish “football” team⁵ and another provided the text I knew from a West Virginia Folklore magazine.⁶ The remaining sources were not found online for viewing.

Searching the American Folk Song Collection, I found two additional sources. One was a recording from Smithsonian Folkways Records,⁷ and the other was another jump rope rhyme collection by Roger Abrahams⁸ which I found via Google Books. This resource brought with it two additional variant texts and three additional sources.

Access Online Resources




Scan this QR code or go to www.tmea.org/songresearch to access a hyperlinked list of resources mentioned in this article and others that will help you in your role as curator of the songs you teach.

Searching the rhyme title in Google Books produced two more sources⁹ dating back to 1888 and 1883 respectively and yet more variants of the text. One more search of the title at Archive.org contributed two more sources¹⁰ to the final list. The result of all this research can be found in my Virtual Folk Song & Rhyme Collection by going to www.livebinders.com, searching my name, and looking under the T tab.

For those interested in an additional example, a similar journey of discovery related to “Lucy Locket” can be found in the winter 2022 edition of the *Kodály Envoy* published by the Organization of American Kodály Educators.

Making Informed Decisions

As the curator of the song material in our classrooms, each music educator makes choices daily regarding what material should stay and what should go. It is a highly personal decision based on a variety of factors. If you are considering the removal of a piece of repertoire, I hope you will employ these techniques and spend some time confirming the cultural accuracy of the information. This will give you a firm foundation for your decisions with your students, your administrators, and your community. 



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References

1. Dr. Constance L. McKoy is Marion Stedman Covington Distinguished Professor and Director of Undergraduate Studies at the University of North Carolina–Greensboro and coauthor of *Culturally Responsive Teaching in Music Education: From Understanding to Application*.
2. “Songs of a Questionable Past” by Lauren McDougale (director of the American Kodály Institute at Loyola University, Maryland) is a Google Document begun in 2019 to capture songs under discussion in music educational circles and the reasons they are considered questionable and is available to all.
3. Harris, Julie C. *The Jump Rope Book*. Nashville, TN: Historical Folk Toys. 2004. p. 16.
4. Matthews, John Hobson. “Counting-Out Rhymes.” *South Wales Daily News*. August 1, 1893.
5. Hugh Shields Collection: Irish Traditional Music Archive (ITMA) Collection 55068 (1968)
6. West Virginia Folklore Journal 21:1 (1980) p. 20
7. Tony Schwartz, ed. *1, 2, 3, and a Zing, Zing, Zing*. New York: Folkways Records FC 7003, tr.2
8. Abrahams, Roger D. *Jump-Rope Rhymes: A Dictionary*. Austin: University of Texas Press. 1969. p. 197.
9. Bolton, Henry Carrington. *The Counting-out Rhymes of Children*. New York, NY: D. Appleton & Co. 1888. p. 93 and Newell, W.W. *Games and songs of American children*. New York: Harper & Bro. 1883. pp. 201-202
10. Korson, George Gershon & Emrich, Marion Vallat. *The Child's Book of Folklore*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press. 1947. p. 135 and Carl Withers. *A Rocket in My Pocket: The Rhymes and Chants of Young Americans*. New York, NY: Scholastic Press. 1948. p. 61.