

Children Don't Know Folk Songs, Threatening Heritage

Children in the United States aren't singing the songs of their heritage, an omission that puts the nation in jeopardy of losing a long-standing and rich part of its identity, a new University of Florida study suggests.

A recent nationwide survey found school music programs are allowing generations-old lullabies, and historical children's and folk songs to be ignored, with some teachers replacing them with the latest pop hits.

Today's school kids are more likely to know the lyrics to popular songs, such as Britney Spears' "Oops!...I Did it Again" or "Lose Yourself" by Eminem, than to "Mary Had a Little Lamb" or "Old MacDonald Had a Farm," said Marilyn Ward, who did the research for her doctoral dissertation in music.

"The study found that, overall, the vast majority of young people could not sing patriotic, folk and children's songs because teachers who teach them at all frequently don't go over the songs enough for students to learn them," she said.

Ward surveyed 4,000 music teachers nationwide from elementary to high school in the summer and early fall of 2002 about how much they taught and how well their students knew by memory 100 well-known songs considered representative of the American heritage.

Research has shown these songs not only help children learn about important events but also allow them to more closely relate to the hardships and joys of their grandparents and ancestors by stepping into their shoes, Ward said.

To create a list of 100 representative songs, Ward distributed written surveys to 223 men and women aged 62 and older who grew up in 44 states as well as 30 elementary music specialists

at top universities as ranked by *U.S. News & World Report*. She then sent written surveys to 4,000 general music teachers listed by the National Association for Music Education — 80 in each state — asking how many of their students could sing these songs from memory. Based on how much time they had spent teaching each song, the teachers — 1,792 of whom responded — were asked to rate this knowledge using one of five measures: practically all, most, some, few or practically none.

Most of the teachers said that few students would be able to sing the songs and that

they had spent little time teaching them. Folk songs were the most neglected, followed by children's and patriotic songs.

"Although Americans say that the singing of folk songs and songs of our heritage is important, we are teaching very few of them in the schools," said UF music Professor Russell Robinson, who supervised the study. "Perhaps this research will alert educators and parents that what we say we want for our young people is not necessarily what we're teaching."

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