

Critical Reggae Music for Antiracist and Pro-Black Teaching in Elementary Literacy Instruction

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Abstract

In this critical autoethnography research, I explore using critical reggae music as an antiracist tool to prepare teacher candidates at the elementary level for antiracist teaching. Through the lenses of critical race theory and critical literacy, I maintain that critical Reggae music is an important antiracist tool for interrupting the absence and banning of counternarratives needed to develop students' critical literacy skills, promote academic excellence, and affirm Black children. I draw from Bob Marley's songs Get Up Stand Up, One Love, and Is this Love? and the corresponding picture books created by his daughter Cedella Marley, and Redemption Song to reveal the ways teachers can learn to demonstrate critical love Sealey-Ruiz [1] by engaging in antiracist Literacy instruction. To explore the antiracist literacy work I am doing in my literacy methods courses data were collected from my research journal, seminar reflection notes, lecture notes, and course outlines for the Literacy teacher preparation courses I taught in Canadian and U.S. contexts to reveal further the ways Black Art literacies such as critical Reggae music can be used to prepare teacher candidates and teachers for antiracist teaching in literacy instruction in elementary schools.

Keywords: Reggae Music, Anti-Racist Teaching, Critical Literacy, Pro-Black, Critical pedagogies, and Black Joy.

1. Introduction

"We're sick and tired of your ism-schism game... Get up, stand up. Stand up for your right Get up, stand up. Don't give up the fight" [2].

This critical autoethnography reveals my interrogation of the multiple reports of the dehumanization of Black children in North American schools seen in disproportionate disciplinary practices some leading to arrests, banning of books on Black histories and identities, and the absence of antiracist teaching practices in many elementary schools [3], [4], [5]. As Bell [6] argued, "to occupy the classroom and the university radically is to teach and learn in ways that reaffirm our status as human beings who

question. It is to question the terms and conditions in which life is lived, experienced and known" (p. 2072).

Critical love [1] for Black children is demonstrated when teachers seek and engage in humanizing teaching practices. Understanding the need for literacy instruction to be a movement across boundaries [7] to address oppression and ensure the valuing of human rights, is crucial for transforming classrooms. Missing from many elementary literacy lessons are diverse voices and the use of Black intellectual perspectives, in particular, to promote learning, critical awareness, joy, and well-being. Thus, my research focuses on exploring the ways teachers and teacher candidates can learn to draw from Black Art literacies such as critical Reggae song lyrics to achieve these goals. "Reggae asserts Africa ideologically, culturally and historically, and promotes a holistic outlook on life" [8], and thus is useful for providing rich counternarratives for educating and uplifting children of African descent. It is also a strong antiracist tool for developing all children's racial literacy skills. Anti-Black racism is often depicted in physical, symbolic, linguistic, curricular and pedagogical, and systemic school violence [9] that if left uninterrupted threatens Black students' well-being and academic performance. Schools are not sites of love and justice if the basic human rights of students are not upheld [10].

Despite several research on the use of popular music for building critical awareness, I concur with Evans [11] that "more research needs to be done, both within the United States and internationally, around the connections amongst popular culture, in- and out-of-school literacies, and the implications of these connections on issues of learning equity for Black youth (p. 858).

Black literacies form part of Black communities' knowledge and perspectives of the world that are needed to disrupt single stories in our schools. Critical Reggae music, as part of Black knowledge and resistance, presents the language, lens, and advocacy needed to challenge this harmful practice. Importantly, it is also a source of Black joy, positive Pro-Black messages, and a "vehicle for Afrocentrism, anti-colonialism, black consciousness, and the masses' political empowerment" [12].

2. Critical Reggae Song Lyrics as an Antiracist Framework

Critical race theorists often use the arts (e.g. composite stories, poetry, drama, and music) as strategies for telling Black people's stories and disrupting the status quo. Seen through a critical race lens, critical Reggae music as an antiracist tool is useful for unveiling and challenging racism in our society. Critical Reggae artists use their music to raise people's critical awareness and demand a movement towards achieving a just society. Their work reveals a call to action, a disruption of silences, distorted history, and promotion of Black joy. In this vein, much can be gleaned from the antiracist narratives in critical Reggae music to help construct antiracist literacy lessons. Some significant antiracist critical Reggae themes for teacher preparation include the following:

- Reggae is “a site of resistance” and retainer of African cultural knowledge [13].
- Presents opportunities to “reclaim and rehabilitate the dignity of blackness” [14].
- Functions as a form of “symbolic insurgency” for challenging oppression [15].
- Provides “liberation discourse”, anti- oppressive “theory and praxis” and therapy for Black people [16].

Teacher preparation programs would benefit from exploring critical Reggae music as a critical lens to help teachers and teacher candidates understand the work needed to transform our schools as spaces where Black people are humanized. The song lyrics as critical text will create opportunities for educators to critically reflect on their biases, assumptions, and practices to construct antiracist lessons and classroom experiences.

Critical Reggae music moves beyond an aesthetic appeal to interrogate and resist oppression. Presenting Reggae, music as a “site of resistance” (p.154),” Cooper [13] argues that Black music often reflects the historical knowledge of people of African descent throughout the African Diaspora. Drawing from Kamau Brathwaite's metaphoric “bridges of sound” she maintains it “affirms the creative potential of Africans in the diaspora to conjure knowledge systems out of nothing, as it were. Africans, taken away without tools, were able to rebuild material culture from the blueprint of knowledge carried in their collective heads” (p.153). Bob Marley's critical Reggae music is influenced by the work of Marcus Mosiah Garvey, a Jamaican-born Pan Africanist and advocate for the rights of Black people in the African Diaspora [17]. Marcus as the founder of the Universal Negro Improvement Association promoted Black

pride, activism, and upliftment also reflected in Bob Marley's lyrical messages. He draws from the work of Jamaican, Pan African and, Marcus Mosiah Garvey, in his song Redemption song to encourage a movement from mental enslavement towards fighting for change. This is a call to become critically aware of oppressive practices in the world. It is also action against these practices. According to Cooper [18], “Emancipation from 'mental slavery' thus means liberation from passivity” (p. 124). In this vein, critical Reggae music mirrors Marcus Garvey's fight for liberating Black people. Bob Marley's music also reflects Rastafarians' practice of grounding their work in “reasoning” or critical talk to raise critical awareness [19]. Thus, through critical Reggae music listeners can learn to develop the antiracist lens and resistant language needed to disrupt the status quo. Cedella Marley's children's books using her father's song lyrics focused on standing up, love, unity, and Black joy present opportunities for teachers to activate children's critical thinking and affirm them.

Exploring Bob Marley's songs as a “symbolic insurgency” Bogues [15], unveils how the critical Reggae artist uses words to interrogate and challenge oppression. He maintained that “to practice symbolic insurgency means that an individual is engaged in consistent efforts to rearrange the ways in which mainstream reality is both constructed and explained” (p.199). In this vein, he noted that symbolic insurgency is evident in Bob Marley's crafty use of words to challenge oppression, promote Black history, interrogate mental slavery, and present everyday opportunities for hope by breaking from the status quo.

3. Social Justice and Racial Literacy Talk in Elementary Schools: “What Literacy Does” [20]

Narrow definitions of literacy others and view the literacies of racialized people through deficit lenses. Viewing literacies as multiple helps to disrupt the status quo in welcoming multiple knowledge, experiences, and perspectives. In this vein, a single definition of literacy must be challenged in our schools to create open spaces for Black children and their peers to learn to interrogate the world they live in. Drawing from Paulo Freire's work several critical scholars have long argued that emphasis in North American schools must not only be placed on reading the word but also on the world [21]. This requires educators to interrogate, as Street [20], has argued, both the construction of literacy and inequality. He maintains that stakeholders must critically reflect on who gets to define literacy, who are the holders of power, and who can “impose inequality” (p.581). He also draws attention to the need to broaden critical discussions from “what literacy is to what literacy does” (p.581). By disrupting singular definitions of

literacy teachers can learn to create spaces that honor community literacies and draw from them to develop students' critical awareness and ability to advocate for themselves and others.

Several research studies reveal a need for more antiracist teaching at the elementary level as scripted curricula silence antiracist literacies and teaching [3]. Kelly and Taylor [22], in their research on critical race theory Tennessee's ban and what it means for literacy instruction found that some elementary teachers in their study felt restricted from engaging in critical literacy and antiracist teaching. One of the teachers noted that the prescribed school textbook "topics like Black music received "a quarter page" of coverage in the text, and as such these topics "never became a larger conversation" (p.183). Yet critical research on the use of music as critical pedagogy reveals its usefulness in developing students' critical literacy. For instance, Evans [11] noted in his research that Hip Hop pedagogy helps youth learn about their social identities, develop their critical media literacy skills, and help address academic disparities in the performance of African American students.

3.1. Critical Reggae Music in Literacy Methods of Instruction

"Critical love is, getting up, standing up, speaking up, refusing to give up in the fight, Nothing happens if you refuse to get up!"

The above ethnos poem from my reflective journal is a dialogic exploration of Bob Marley's Get Up Stand Up song and Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz's work on critical love reflecting the ways I connect his critical Reggae songs to my antiracist teaching lens. My literacy methods courses are so framed to help teacher candidates engage in antiracist work and envision love as an action against unjust practices. When teachers and teacher candidates view love as action, they will better understand that complicity is inaction that maintains the status quo and creates a classroom atmosphere of lovelessness for Black children. Caring for communities demands a willingness to unlearn biases and learn ways of collaborating with them against social injustice. It means honoring multiliteracies including critical Reggae music and disrupting Eurocentric literacy practices.

3.2. Critical Interactive Read-Aloud

To help develop teacher candidates' ability to engage in antiracist teaching and demonstrate critical love I engage them in assignments focused on constructing critical read-aloud lessons that center on Black stories and experiences. This includes Bob and Cedella Marley's picture books with critical literacy themes. What follows is an example of an interactive read-aloud model that I created to indicate the ways

teachers can use critical Reggae children's books and song lyrics to engage children in critical talk about unjust practices.

3.3. Picture Book Analysis of Get Up, Stand Up by Bob Marley and Cedella Marley

Before the Reading, The book cover and title analysis questions are as follows:

- What do you notice about the children on the book cover?
- What is the book title saying?
- What does it mean to stand up?
- Can you describe a time when you had to stand up for your rights or the rights of others?
- Antiracist discussion: During Reading
- What does the author mean by "stinging words"?
- Why do you think some people use "stinging words to others?
- How do stinging words make you feel?
- Who is being unkind in the story? What is this person doing?
- What would you do if you saw someone being bullied?
- How can we stand up against those who are unkind?

Important antiracist themes explored in the books include standing up for what's right, hope, dreaming, truth-telling, and not giving up the fight. It interrogates bullying, distorted information, and people who use words to harm. Themes such as being kind to yourself and others, sharing your truth, being a "bright light", being a good neighbor, being true to what is right, and fighting injustice together can be used by teachers to guide elementary students in thinking critically about their world and the part they can play in helping to transform it.

Bob and Cedella Marley's Get Up Stand Up picture book can be used by teachers to ignite joy and resistance to injustice. The catchy song lyrics are useful for grabbing students' attention and engagement. The book's exploration of the problem of bullying helps to expose children to different examples of injustice including racism. It indicates that it is important for children to begin learning to stand for themselves and others. Is this Love? A picture book by Bob and Cedella [23] Marley focuses on love within a family. The central theme is an older child's love for a younger sibling, through its positive portrayal of sibling interaction. Viewed through a

critical race lens, the book challenges deficit perspectives about Black families through its positive portrayal of a loving sister caring for her younger sibling. It promotes Black joy through the celebration of Black love. To love is presented as a decision, it is an action which is seen in the words of Bob Marley's song "I'm going to love you and treat you right". Love is presented to children as the right treatment. Teachers can draw from this lyric to have students share their thoughts on what it means to be treated right and to treat others right. Similarly, love is centered in the picture book, *One Love* by Cedella and Bob Marley. Love is action, a movement towards unity and solidarity. The book's theme indicates that love is needed to achieve unity against injustice. Through the song lyric, "let's get together and feel all right," love is also presented as integral for well-being (to "feel all right") presenting opportunities for teachers and teacher candidates to connect to students' socioemotionally while raising their critical awareness.

4. Conclusion

"No Matter the silly games that people play, You have hopes and dreams. They can't take away. When their words bite, Stand Up for what's right"[23].

The above extract from Cedella and Bob Marley *Get up, Stand up* picture book epitomizes the power of Black literacies to uplift Black children and help them stand against injustice. Their white peers can also learn the importance of standing with them to help transform the world. The hopes and dreams of Black children are being taken away when Eurocentric literacy instruction is left unchallenged. Teachers' candidates can learn to restore them by engaging in antiracist teaching. Critical reggae music as an antiracist tool functions as an unveiling of oppression, a call to action, and Black joy as resistance. Bob Marley's call to "Get up, stand up" is a call from being complicit with oppression to taking action. Nothing happens if we do not get up. Black children "are constantly barraged with messages through the media and elsewhere that they are not worthy of love and opportunities" (Sealey-Ruiz, 2021, p.288). Teachers and teacher candidates should get up for Black children by engaging in humanizing teaching practices that demonstrate one love.

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