

Chapter 4

Exegetical Commentary

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I have noted that current aspirations for changes in Singaporean teachers' teaching practices towards a more student-centric and twenty-first century-based learning outcomes are actively promoted as a nation-wide innovation. This chapter describes a Singaporean music teacher's learning about and trying out the practice of creative music-making to perceive, conceptualize and express ideas. Most educators and stakeholders will probably agree at least at a rhetoric level that these are fundamental capabilities for creative expressions and critical thoughts since their own schooling era. However the issue is why there are consistent systemic challenges to supporting many Singaporean music teacher colleagues to be adequately prepared for such teaching-learning aspirations. Reading descriptions of Mrs. Sena's learning reminds me of the importance of attending to a teacher's professional learning, growth (Pedder and Opher 2013; Clarke and Hollingsworth 2002) and embodied knowing (Dall'Alba and Barnacle 2005) as we think of ways to emancipating any *impasse* of enabling changes of *any* teacher's classroom practice. By making use of the analytical lens of ways of seeing a teacher's internal 'subjective' world of attitudes, beliefs, knowledge, personality, values; an external 'objective' world of sources of information, stimulus or support; and authentic lived practice, I hope to shed further light on the questions raised in the foregoing discussion of various episodes of Mrs. Sena's 'learning as she goes' of creative music-making.

Running through Mrs. Sena's reflections and in particular to her espoused ambivalence, I am optimistic that an 'unqualified' Music teacher with limited prior music education training or engagement with creative music-making activities can teach music creatively. This is provided that teachers know, understand and are convinced of the context and purpose of creative music-making sufficiently to interrogate their own beliefs and practice. Awareness could quickly founder if teachers see no benefit, value or if they cannot envisage trying it out efficaciously.

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In the case of Mrs. Sena, the convergence of her changing values and recognition of the utility of creative music-making has produced a strong self-agency, which drives the process of her engagement with learning and practicing it. According to Pedder and Opher (2012), teaching and learning practices that teachers genuinely value, are practices they are more likely to prioritize, and as such, practices they are more willing to incorporate as embedded features of their classroom practices. Self-agency is a powerful enabler for fostering a teacher's learning and change. But the cycle of such self-persuasion may be short-lived if they are not supported to sustain the effort of reflection and experimentation, due to various impediments like lack of time, growing self-doubt and excessive external control.

As Fullan (1993) puts it, it is not enough for teachers to be exposed to new ideas, they need time to know where the new ideas fit in their past and future lived experience and how to become skilled in them in the present (and not just like them). The preceding sections did not describe the details of the precise methodology of how the 'basic pedagogical and facilitation ideas of creative music-making activities' have been introduced to Mrs. Sena as an external source of knowledge.

I believe that there was a thorough and systematic process of helping her to examine her attitudes, beliefs and values permeating her changing day-to-day music teaching, while she interacted with new knowledge. This should be very helpful in helping the research team members and participating teachers to understand and articulate issues of learning and change. This cycle of reflection and conversation, stimulated Mrs. Sena to ask and respond to difficult questions which could otherwise remain very tacit and potentially threatening to her self-esteem.

The early affirmation of success in her very determined experimentation and also the care and support given to her by the school to further her music training become *other* important 'external' factors that negotiate her 'internal' struggle for the lack of congruency of creativity with her own 'rigid' or 'structured' style of teaching and personality. The positive experience becomes part of her professional knowledge that changes her internal world of conception of teaching and learning in music (Clarke and Hollingsworth 2002). The mediation of internal and external orientation of Mrs. Sena's learning, together with the close alignment between values and practices, provide grounds for my optimism of the findings here. In seeking a way forward to supporting other teachers in their professional learning, constructive strategies need to be developed to ensure teachers can learn in their own authentic way while taking into account the support that can be given by the school, community and Higher Music Education Institution. This balancing of considerations of accountability, agency, competence and building competencies is not merely theoretical but points to the authenticity and complexity of professional learning.

Tensions from the competing agendas of competencies and competence, and consequent dilemmas in how Mrs. Sena reconciled her 'structured' and 'freed' selves, can also be discussed in terms of the vacillation within dilemmatic spaces of "certainty" and "uncertainty" (Helsing 2007). Mrs. Sena's initial preference of lesson delivery was more structured and she sought for clear outcomes by presumably limiting the musical roles that students can partake in the music classroom. As she

grew more confident and was willing to let the students take ownership and control, she was more open to embracing the uncertainty (and hence possibilities) of musical explorations in composing and improvisation. Nevertheless, she acknowledged that her students' desire for freedom to explore was some distance from her more 'conformist' reality, even though she was keen to explore this brave new world herself. Studying Mrs. Sena's dilemmatic spaces provides opportunities for understanding her professional identity as a music teacher in a very deliberate way. The dilemmatic spaces offers ways of connecting the formation of her past and present music teacher's professional identity and how she value and will continue to discover new professional knowledge, in this case through reconciling different expectations of creative music-making activities.

Finally in reflecting on Mrs. Sena's professional knowledge and learning, I discovered I saw her not just in terms of her music competence or competencies. I became aware that learning about her journey is much more than whether she has or has not successfully learnt and tried out creative music-making activities. Rather, knowing about this journey cannot be separated from knowing her lived experiences as a social participant in her world. Arguably, knowing about her learning therefore involves knowing her as a whole person and the different realities she resided in. Dall'Alba and Barnacle (2005) coined the term "embodied knowing" for understanding learning to be a socially constructed practice. Such an emphasis of knowing can help us see more clearly how Mrs. Sena has passed beyond restricted worlds of socially-culturally defined 'past', and being able to develop creative imaginations for the future.

Conceiving knowing as embodied reminds us that professional learning is not only an epistemological concern about what Mrs. Sena has known and acted on (or not know or unable to do), but also an ontological one that prompts us to ask further: *Who is Mrs. Sena?* In responding to this last question, we can then begin to appreciate and celebrate with her to the fullest extent, all the insights she has garnered, and in our own little way, wish her well as she continues to learn as she goes.

References

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