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Enabling Popular Music Teaching in the Secondary Classroom – Singapore Teachers' Perspectives

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The pervasiveness of popular music and its associated practices in current youth cultures brings into question the relevance and effectiveness of more traditional music pedagogies, and propels a search for a more current and engaging music pedagogy informed by popular music practices. With this as the basis, this study seeks to explore factors that may enable the success and effectiveness of popular music programmes in public schools through the lenses of three Singapore secondary school teachers as they conducted their popular music lessons over seven to ten weeks. In the process, the study also describes how these teachers pragmatically negotiated the execution of these programmes within Singapore's unique educational context. The findings may serve to inform music teachers and school leaders keen to establish similar programmes as a matter of on-going dialogue.

Popular music learning has become increasingly widespread in mainstream schools in various countries, its advantages over more traditional music learning methods becoming more recognised as it proliferates. In the United Kingdom, the move towards adopting pedagogies based on the real-world practices of popular and community musicians is dominated by the Musical Futures movement (D'Amore, 2006), which reported improved student learning and engagement and prompted a re-evaluation of current teaching practises and support. In Australia, the inclusion of popular music practices in its music syllabuses since the 1970s has resulted in necessary adjustments in pedagogy and the re-theorisation of music education when previous syllabuses were found unsuitable for popular music instruction (Dunbar–Hall & Wemyss, 2000). In China, the 2011 reform of the Curriculum Standards for Primary Education and Junior Secondary Education marked the first time popular songs were introduced and propelled the search for ways to engage students with popular music in public schools (Ho, 2014).

In tandem with worldwide trends, it is timely to evaluate popular music classroom situations in Singapore in a move to inform teachers keen to initiate similar programmes, and to suggest possible support and re-framing of curriculum needed for the effective implementation of popular music programmes.

Popular Music and Informal Learning

Popular music connotes a wide range of music that appeals to large audiences. It is eclectic, inclusive, and encompasses a wide variety of musical genres. It plays an important socio-cultural role in the life-long learning of people of all ages and reiterates its place in the music curriculum as music in lived and living space (Dairianathan & Lum, 2010). Beyond understanding popular music on its own terms is the concern that the school-based music curriculum may be so different from actual musical practices of the youth and that the 'imperatives have left little room for educators to creatively ... engage the complex lives of young people ... a schism has grown between in-school and out-of-school culture' (Dimitriadis, 2009, p. 8, in Dairianathan & Lum, 2010, pp. 32–33).

In Singapore, studies by Wong (1999) on student and teacher attitudes towards secondary music education reveal students' marginalization of music relative to other subjects, and suggest finding ways in which music can be made valuable to students personally beyond imparting musical knowledge and skills, while consistently modernising the syllabus. Inklings of ways to modernise the curriculum to make music more meaningful and relevant to Singapore students can be found in a study conducted by the Curriculum Planning and Development Division of Singapore's Ministry of Education, involving music teachers and students from 50 schools. Findings indicate that even though classical music was played most often at Primary and Secondary levels, student participants preferred popular music to any other types of music at both levels in most schools (Chua & Koh, 2007, p. 16). In a study by Teo (2005) on Primary and Secondary students' musical preferences and attitudes in Singapore, participants also showed greater inclination towards popular music compared to classical music and non-Western music.

These suggest a need to better translate the musical attitudes, preferences, experiences and practices of the Singapore youth outside of school into school settings, which will require a re-look at teachers' roles as well as the nature of learning in the classroom. If popular music is to be used as the medium for this translation to occur, there is also a need for musical knowings to be democratised by placing the skills, knowledge and understandings of the popular musician on an equal platform as formal musical knowings and to 'recognise, foster and reward a range of musical skills and knowledge that have not previously been emphasised in music education' (Green, 2008, p. 1).

To address these, the works of Lucy Green on informal popular music learning practices (2002, 2004, 2008) and Musical Futures (D'Amore, 2006) were taken as starting points to explore the fostering and development of students' musical and extra-musical skills and knowledge in Singapore's Secondary General Music Programme[1] (GMP) classroom.

Green (2002, p. 16) defines informal music learning as 'a variety of approaches to acquiring musical skills and knowledge outside formal educational settings', and refers to informal music learning as a set of 'practices' rather than 'methods' because 'methods' suggests conscious, focused and goal-directed engagement, whereas 'practices' leaves open the degree of consciousness and goal-directedness. She observes how formal educational situations and informal music learning have for centuries been segregated, which precipitates the need to bridge the gap in order to incorporate informal learning in the music classroom towards better creative efforts and outcomes.

The egalitarian, fluid nature of informal learning engenders individuality while fostering community and serves to create educational environments that are 'both directive and liberative, didactic and dialogical, subject-centered and student-centered' (Jorgensen, 2003, p. 141). Through self-directed, peer-directed and group learning, students are also propelled to be creative and make informed decisions about sounds, which will much later become a matter of interrelatedness of socio-cultural identities, bringing forth greater social cohesion and integration of the individual learner within the musical ensemble and communities of practice beyond (Wenger, 1998).

Informal Learning in Singapore Schools

Music education in Singapore schools is guided by the GMP syllabus (Ministry of Education, 2015) which is in turn framed within a stage-based, spiral curriculum structure, where learning is accumulated by revisiting the same learning outcomes over eight years, each time at a higher stage of complexity. It presents a highly structured and sequential programme of music teaching and learning with prescribed standard stages of achievement. Though this may seem to conflict with the organic and open-ended characteristics of informal learning, it is possible that a popular music curriculum, in its non-sequential ways, can still meet the general outcomes of the syllabus through different means. Indeed, the process of listening, imitating, composing, improvising and identity formation evident in a popular music curriculum – through which students develop musical and extra-musical competence – is clearly aligned with the aims and learning outcomes of the GMP syllabus through listening, responding, creating and performing. However, it remains to be determined if Singapore teachers are receptive to reinterpreting and reframing the syllabus, and if they possess the necessary competence to incorporate informal popular music learning styles in their classrooms.

To address this, an online Learning Needs Analysis (LNA) survey was conducted to determine Singapore music teachers' attitude and competence in popular music teaching as a preliminary phase of this study[2]. Out of a total of 351 primary and secondary schools in Singapore, 390 music teachers from 112 schools responded to the survey.

Readings indicate that 57.5% of the teachers surveyed did not involve students in popular music practices such as writing lyrics, setting lyrics to popular music or using music production software during popular music lessons. Up to 50.4% of the teachers lacked confidence in teaching popular music arrangement, the use of music production software in popular music making, and creating and performing popular music without using Western notation. These may suggest that a significant number of Singapore music teachers are neither confident nor equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills to carry out informal learning pedagogy through popular music making, and are not inclined towards such programmes. This study seeks to address this gap by exploring ways in which popular music programmes may be effectively enabled within Singapore's educational context.

Methodology

With the survey findings in perspective, music teachers who participated in the survey were invited to attend three three-hour popular music workshops to better acquaint them with popular music teaching practices and lesson ideas in the music classroom, including informal learning. Two of the teachers who attended the workshops, as well as one who was unable to, proceeded to the classroom implementation phase, where each of their popular music programmes in school was tracked and observed by a researcher over a span of seven to ten weeks to address the following initial questions:

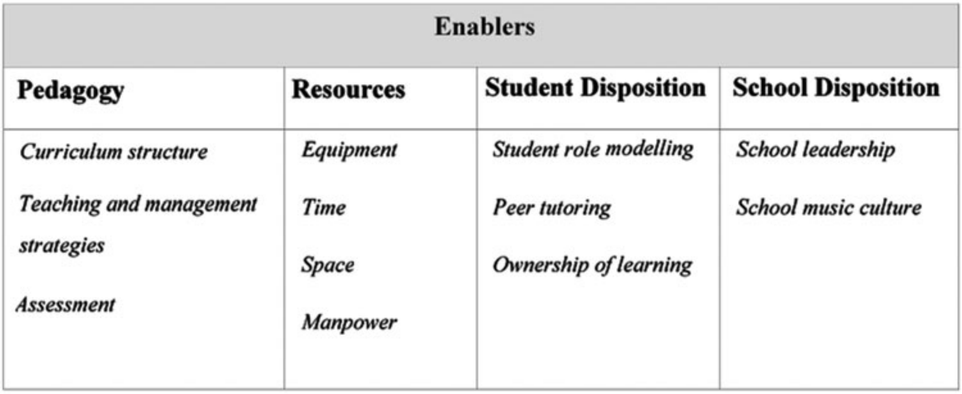
1. Based on the teachers' teaching experiences and understanding of popular music learning and practices, how can popular music programmes be effectively delivered in the GMP classroom?
2. What are some constraints that impeded the effectiveness of their popular music programmes?
3. What are some implications on the GMP syllabus content and structure, school support and pedagogy if popular music programmes were to be effectively delivered in the GMP classroom?

Popular music connotes a wide range of music that appeals to large audiences, encompassing a variety of genres. Though this piece of research was initiated with this broad conception of popular music as the starting point – to engage students in the classroom through music and musical practices that appeal and relate to them personally, however their musical preferences and performance selections in the research indicate a strong inclination towards 'pop' and 'rock' genres as popular music choices that appeal to them. Consequently, the term 'popular music' used in this study may be narrowed down more specifically to 'pop' and 'rock' genres within Western popular music culture, as well as from East and South-East Asia such as K-pop (Korea), M-pop (Mandarin) and J-pop (Japan).

The purpose of this study is not to discover any universally correct way of implementing popular music programmes or to generalise, but rather to explore the issues at hand as matters for on-going dialogue. The sample size is small to allow for the emergence of rich and detailed data that reflect the unique contexts in which the teachers respond with personality and individuality. The teachers were selected based on their willingness to participate, and how different they were in terms of their music teaching experience and preferences, music background, and the context within which they implemented these programmes, in order to obtain data representing different perspectives.

The teachers, Glenn, Mitch and Cherie (pseudonyms) were each observed and interviewed by a researcher from our research team as a separate case, and consisted of one professor and two lecturers steeped in the relevant music pedagogy in order to offer informed evaluation and perspectives on the data gathered. The popular music classes were conducted for about an hour every week for Secondary two GMP classes. The classes instructed by Glenn and Mitch were two mixed-gender Express[3] classes with class sizes of 39 and 26, and the one Normal Technical[4] class which consisted of 39 boys was instructed by Cherie. Most students had no formal music training. The final outcome of the music programmes in all three schools was to have the students rearrange and perform, in groups, a popular song of their choice with their preferred instruments, which should include but not restricted to instruments taught in class. Explorations of the teachers' teaching approaches in their individual circumstances were intended to generate as many 'ideas, issues, topics and themes as possible' so as to 'generate theory that grows out of or is directly relevant to activities in the setting under study' (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 1995, pp. 166–167).

Written consent was obtained from all teachers and students involved prior to the start of the research. Data collected include video and audio-recordings of weekly classroom observations, post-lesson interviews and focus group discussion, as well as teaching resources and researchers' field-notes. Constant comparative method of analysis (Creswell, 1998) was adopted to identify common themes within each case and across all three cases.



Enablers			
Pedagogy	**Resources**	**Student Disposition**	**School Disposition**
Curriculum structure *Teaching and management strategies* *Assessment*	*Equipment* *Time* *Space* *Manpower*	*Student role modelling* *Peer tutoring* *Ownership of learning*	*School leadership* *School music culture*

Figure 1. Enablers for the delivery of popular music programmes in the secondary GMP classroom

Transcripts of data were read and re-read for meaning, and categorised and re-categorised into themes as more data emerged from the readings and were compared against each other. Themes followed by master themes common across all three cases were established in the emerging process. Attention was paid to ensure descriptions of teaching and student impact from teachers' interviews and focus group discussion triangulated with actual classroom occurrences and teaching resources. The draft of this paper was then sent out to the teachers for verification before it was finalised.

Analysis revealed how the teachers negotiated their popular music curriculums within their schools in relation to their teaching practices and beliefs under four broad themes: pedagogy, resources, student disposition and school disposition (Figure 1), which shed light on the enablers of their programmes.

Discussion

Figure 2 summarizes the following discussion on the ways in which popular music programmes are enabled in the case studies. Even though the themes are discussed separately, it is important to note their complex interconnectedness and interdependence on each other.

Pedagogy

Curriculum structure; teaching and management strategies. Classroom observations, lesson outlines and interviews with the three teachers indicate their inclination towards what might be termed a 'fundamentals first, explorations later' curriculum structure, where fundamental musical and self-management skills deemed necessary were first established before the exploration phase in their weekly lessons. Imparting 'fundamentals' through direct teacher instruction was necessary before students could work on their music projects more freely:

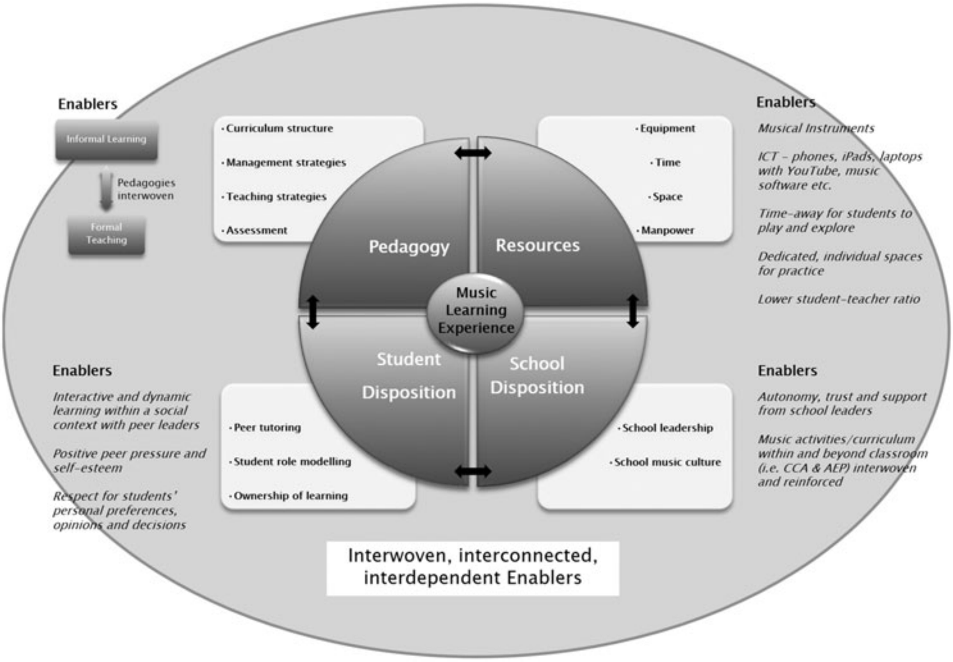

Enablers
Informal Learning
Pedagogies interwoven
Formal Teaching
• Curriculum structure
• Management strategies
• Teaching strategies
• Assessment
• Equipment
• Time
• Space
• Manpower
Enablers
Musical Instruments
ICT – phones, iPads, laptops with YouTube, music software etc.
Time-away for students to play and explore
Dedicated, individual spaces for practice
Lower student-teacher ratio
Pedagogy
Resources
Music Learning Experience
Student Disposition
School Disposition
Enablers
Interactive and dynamic learning within a social context with peer leaders
Positive peer pressure and self-esteem
Respect for students' personal preferences, opinions and decisions
• Peer tutoring
• Student role modelling
• Ownership of learning
• School leadership
• School music culture
Enablers
Autonomy, trust and support from school leaders
Music activities/curriculum within and beyond classroom (i.e. CCA & AEP) interwoven and reinforced
Interwoven, interconnected, interdependent Enablers

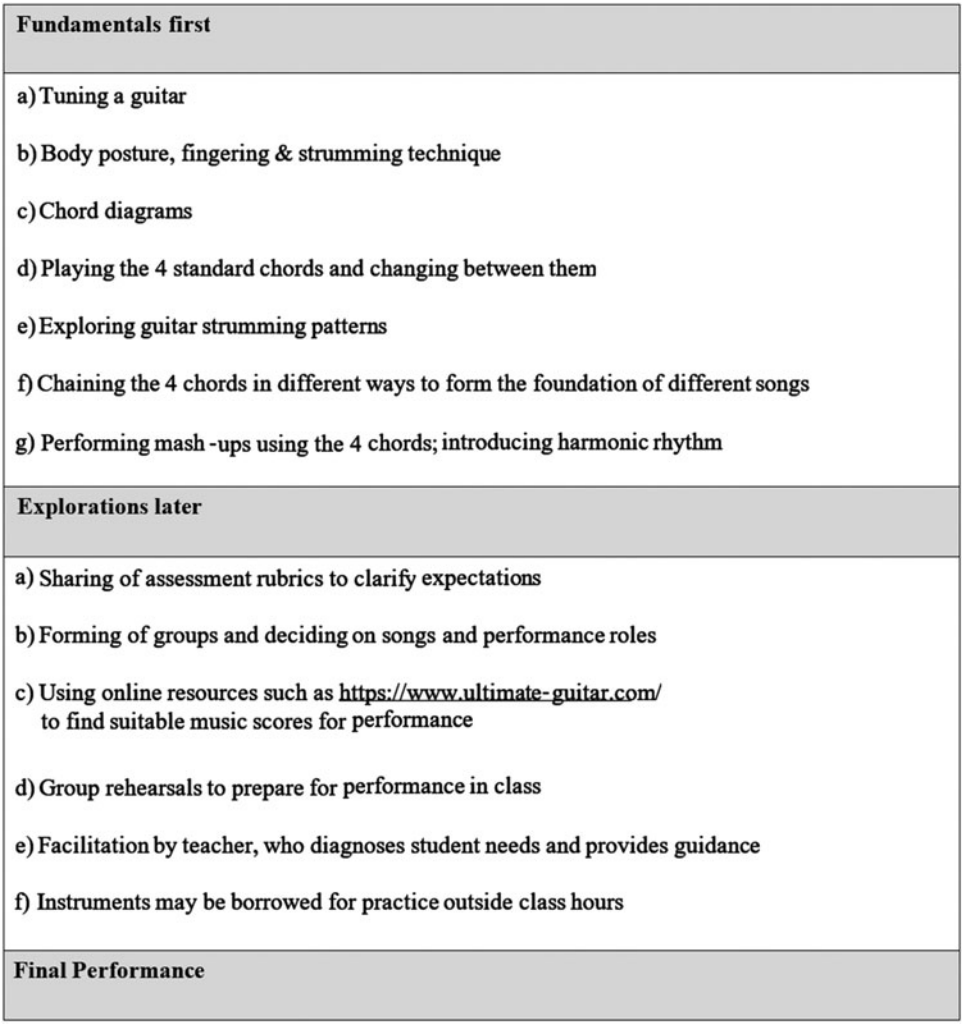
Figure 2. Summary of enablers for the delivery of popular music programmes in the secondary GMP classroom

> Glenn: The pockets of instructions and the (limited pockets of) free time . . . it's like this because they need to learn the fundamentals first, and the basic skills first. After that . . . they really will have a lot of free time. But that is something I'm looking into at this stage as well, for this beginning stage.

For Mitch, who was previously involved in a Musical Futures classroom trial project, 'scaffolding' and 'grounding' were necessary before informal learning, which otherwise could be too open-ended for his students:

> Our students really need a lot more scaffolding. So the whole idea behind (teaching them the song) 'I'm Yours' is to give them that scaffolding and give them an option to go to. Because . . . if I just said to them, 'Okay, get a cover song and let's work on doing it together,' they literally will just have no idea (what to do) or choose something wildly inappropriate. So I think it's good to give them the grounding.

Providing the fundamentals first for all students, such as learning set songs and basic chord progressions, created a safety net for their students to fall back on in case subsequent group explorations fail to yield any meaningful results. Once this platform was established, the teachers proceeded with differentiated learning during the exploration phase, where informal learning would occur and students' individual needs and interests could be



Fundamentals first

a) Tuning a guitar

b) Body posture, fingering & strumming technique

c) Chord diagrams

d) Playing the 4 standard chords and changing between them

e) Exploring guitar strumming patterns

f) Chaining the 4 chords in different ways to form the foundation of different songs

g) Performing mash -ups using the 4 chords; introducing harmonic rhythm

Explorations later

a) Sharing of assessment rubrics to clarify expectations

b) Forming of groups and deciding on songs and performance roles

c) Using online resources such as https://www.ultimate-guitar.com/
to find suitable music scores for performance

d) Group rehearsals to prepare for performance in class

e) Facilitation by teacher, who diagnoses student needs and provides guidance

f) Instruments may be borrowed for practice outside class hours

Final Performance

Figure 3. Glenn's curriculum structure for guitar playing and pop song arrangement

better addressed. Figure 3 shows an example of the 'fundamentals first, explorations later' curriculum structure designed by Glenn.

Though informal learning took place in varying degrees, the emphasis on teacher control was given significant importance in the process of establishing structure and direction to the lessons prior to the start of informal learning. In this first phase which comprised mainly of teaching of fundamentals through formal instruction and teacher-directed activities, their teaching and management strategies include:

1. Ensuring students were on task and possessed the necessary discipline for constructive learning to take place through the establishment of weekly routines. These routines

include reiterations of final project outcomes, learning attitude and expectations at the beginning and end of each lesson, feedback on students' behaviour and performance, warm-up activities that reinforced and developed upon what was taught in the previous lesson, and systematic collection and return of instruments. Glenn shared the importance of such routines in establishing the correct learning climate:

> I think that it is very good because it prepares them mentally when they come here and it also teaches them that . . . it's about music but at the same time things have to be done properly . . . because if you just go straight in and . . . just strumming . . . mindlessly then you are not really learning anything.

2. Use of imitation, such as getting students to imitate teacher's body percussion rhythms or guitar strumming patterns, to acquire the basic skills and concepts deemed necessary for the success of the project.
3. Use of learner-based teaching sequences, where the learning started with what was most attainable by the students, rather than what was musically rational. For instance, when teaching the chords for a song in G major, the E minor chord was taught first because it was deemed easier to play, even though it should be musically more logical to introduce the tonic chord first.
4. Adapting the lesson based on student progress and teachable moments, such as modifying the difficulty of the rhythmic warm-up exercises based on students' progress, or demonstrating how to change a guitar string when a student's guitar string snapped.

Though each teacher decided on what fundamentals should be taught before students were deemed ready for self-directed learning, the musical fundamentals common in all classes involved: a) playing the basic I-IV-V-VI chords in various sequences on an instrument, b) improvising accompaniment/strumming patterns on the instrument, and c) singing over the chord sequences in time. An additional instrument, such as the cajon, might be introduced briefly, but served simply as an option to complement their performances.

The teacher-directed phase of learning was balanced by the increasing amount of exploration time and space given in the second phase of the popular music project, where the teachers attempted to address the diverse learning needs and outcomes of the different student groups as they worked on their final performances. It is worthwhile to note that the fundamental and exploration segments within a curriculum structure might not be distinctly segregated. Rather, the exploration component in each lesson grew increasingly significant over the weeks until it became fully dominant.

The teachers used the following teaching and management strategies in the exploration phase:

1. Use of Internet media, namely YouTube videos and MP3s as idea sources for students' song choices and music arrangement. The videos also served as tutorials for students, from which they could acquire the necessary skills and knowledge for their performances. As a rule of thumb, Mitch required each student group to find a YouTube tutorial for its song choice. Through YouTube, his students could learn from virtual instructors in his absence during group work sessions (a common occurrence in large classes). It enabled diversification of learning and less reliance on his skill sets to accomplish their performance outcomes.

2. Use of soft intervention techniques to avoid disrupting students' work flow during group work sessions by asking open-ended questions and giving suggestions to students, which they could take up only if they wished to.
3. Use of differentiated approaches to address diverse learners. Slower learners were given more practice time, step-by-step instructions and teacher demonstrations. The teacher also negotiated ways to make their selected songs easier to perform, such as by simplifying the rhythms, dropping some non-essential chords, or cutting out some verses. Fast learners were taught new skills and knowledge or appointed as peer tutors to assist their groups.
4. Allowance for downtime to allow students to explore, experiment and assimilate learning on their own terms, in the process making the music their own. A level of playful distractedness was condoned in the classroom in recognition of the necessary time away from the task at hand in order to recharge.
5. Allowance for students to use their various prior knowledge and skills for the project. In Mitch's case, he allowed a student skilled in clarinet playing to incorporate it in his group's final performance of their pop song cover. Students were also generally allowed to choose their own friendship groups for this reason, as their familiarity with each other helped them tap on each other's musical strengths.

Of note was how these informal segments of learning were not as open-ended and self-directed as one might assume. Rather, the teachers often assigned specific tasks for the students to accomplish for the different informal learning sessions. For instance, Mitch specified a different task for each informal learning session – a) sourcing for YouTube tutorials, b) exploring instruments, and c) preparing a segment of a performance for feedback. This formalisation of a learning practice that is essentially informal could perhaps be attributed to their Western Classical music background and its associated pedagogical practises, comparative lack of exposure to informal learning, and the responsibilities and accountability involved in teaching within a formal educational setting (Green, 2002, p. 184):

> Mitch: When I first graduated as a teacher I taught the way that I taught myself. Over time I had to learn not to do that. It took me a while . . . I had to fight against the way I was.

It also might be inevitable that the teachers formalised the learning process based on experiences garnered from previously-run popular music programmes, by distilling it into the most efficient instructional sequence to best achieve the desired outcomes within the given time. This formalisation could perhaps be justified within the informal learning phase, because experienced teachers might wish to bring the hidden steps within the informal learning sequence – copying recordings, improvising, composing and performing – to the fore through their personal conceptions, in order to reorganise or re-frame these skills to promote student learning (Rodriguez, 2009, p. 38).

This also illustrates how the theoretical dichotomy between formal and informal pedagogies may not be easily perceivable in the actual classroom, as both are present to different extents at different points in time and are constantly interacting. They may be better understood as resting on a continuum based on the situation (e.g. learning within formal or informal settings), learning style (e.g. conceptual or experiential learning), ownership (e.g. teacher or student directed), and intentionality (e.g. towards learning how to play or towards playing) (Folkestad, 2006). For teachers working on the ground, rather than defining and deliberating between the merits of one pedagogy over the other, it may perhaps be more prudent to negotiate ways in which both formal and informal pedagogies may be best interwoven and integrated to meet the learning outcomes of their music programmes in complementary ways, within the constraints of a school culture with diverse agendas.

Assessment. In the institutionalization of learning where assessment plays a significant role in accounting for students' learning, questions about appropriate assessment emerged from the discussion with the teachers. The issue is significant as students in GMP classes are commonly equipped with different types and levels of musical competence and are assessed in groups, within which they contribute in various ways. Assessment strategies adopted by the teachers, which are aligned with the Ministry of Education's vision of assessment drawn from the Assessment Competency Framework developed by National Institute of Education (Ministry of Education, 2009), include:

1. Adopting holistic assessment by looking beyond musical achievements. Students in Glenn's classes were not only assessed based on standardised assessment rubrics – he would also moderate the scores for individual students based on extra-musical contributions such as peer-tutoring, leadership skills or teamwork. These additional expectations, which were often imposed on more accomplished students, were communicated to them in advance so that they were clear about the expectations. Besides the final performance assessment, peer-assessment of contributions by each team member and self-assessment of personal learning were also taken into account, thus making differentiated grades for students within the same group possible.
2. Setting of expectations and specific tasks to ensure students were directed and purpose-driven, such as requiring each student to have a significant role to play in the group, or for the music to have a distinct structure. Feedback on students' performance was provided at the beginning and/or end of lesson to inform students about areas for improvement, in relation to the expectations set.
3. Setting intermittent assessment points to track students' progress and understand what they wanted to achieve in order to help them succeed. For Mitch, these assessment points consisted of being able to play the standard four chords on the ukulele to accompany a given pop song, putting up trial performances that were video-recorded for review, and a follow-up master class to help students improve on their performance. To him, these checkpoints were essential in keeping students on track and were a better gauge of student progress compared to a single final performance:

> . . . there needs to be . . . work-in-progress type of performances, so they can see what's working and what's not working.
> I feel it is important for me as a teacher to sort of gauge . . . how they have progressed since day one, and not just on the day itself. On the day itself, they might be very nervous and might not perform very well, but that doesn't mean that they didn't learn anything.

4. Sharing of assessment rubrics weeks before the final performance to guide both teacher and students towards shared outcomes through common understanding of expectations.
5. Providing immediate and surgical feedback to students based on their areas for improvement as diagnosed by the teacher during informal learning sessions in order to address specific learning needs as they emerge.
6. Use of video recording to document students' trial and final performances as a means to provide feedback to students by reviewing their performances through video playback.
7. Assessing students' understanding by requiring them to reflect on their learning through teacher-crafted survey forms after the final performance.

Resources

In Singapore secondary schools, a student-teacher ratio of 40 students to one teacher is the norm rather than exception in the music classroom. Lower secondary students receive an average of one hour of music lesson per week for six months to a year depending on resource deployment. One music room is typically allocated for music teaching, though it is commonly shared with music Co-Curricular Activities (CCA) which are active after school hours. Within this context, the teachers shared on how resources impacted upon the effectiveness of their popular music programmes.

Equipment. A classroom set-up with readily available resources for pop band learning contributed to student motivation and set the right learning tone in the classroom:

> Mitch: It's good amount of motivation . . . every time you walk into a music classroom, you have the music instruments in front of you. You really want to pick the instruments up and have a go.

Besides pop band instruments, the availability of Wi-Fi-enabled hand phones, iPads and laptops also played a significant role in enabling learning, primarily for sourcing YouTube tutorials so that students could learn on their own in the teacher's absence, and as a source of ideas for songs, strumming patterns, chord progressions and music arrangements:

> Mitch: I've got about ten laptops that my students could use in class and also just recently the school installed Wi-Fi so they can actually access Wi-Fi on their hand phones. So a lot of times when (they needed to) look up chord shapes and things like that they just (went) straight to the hand phone or to the laptop.

For Cherie, using virtual instruments on iPads helped her overcome logistical issues of providing sufficient real instruments for all her students:

> (As) they would not get the luxury of having a real band to play with . . . they will maybe get to touch the keyboards on iPads . . . then you tell them, okay, cause there's no guitars, this is a replacement.

Time. Sufficient time-away for students to play and explore is an important aspect of the creative thinking process (Burnard & Younker, 2002, 2004; Webster, 2002). Extended periods of creative play allow for the stimulation and engagement of the psychomotor and the cognitive when students get 'into the flow', where musical play transforms into valuable learning experiences as they become immersed in their creative activities (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Though the teachers acknowledged this, they found the amount of teaching time too little for immersion to take place sufficiently, which impacted upon their curriculum structure and teaching strategies. For Glenn, the time for student-directed, immersive learning was reduced as the need to efficiently teach music fundamentals to the whole class before the informal learning phase took priority:

> . . . what if I just gave them the instruments and let them do whatever they wish? I think that might work given a much longer time frame . . . and it also implies a lot more independence on their part . . . if I am given more time I will definitely try to explore that . . . because . . . I can sense that (these) lessons (that teach them) the basics . . . they don't enjoy it that much. But . . . there's constraints within the classroom.

He further highlighted the tension between informal learning and the time allowed for that within structured time:

> . . . the jamming, just messing around is actually part of it . . . but some groups . . . spend way too long just doing that. And then when it's . . . time to rehearse the song and get things together, they actually have left themselves with not enough time . . .

Time constraints also caused the teachers to focus mainly on one instrument, though ideally students should be able to learn the instruments of their choice.

Manpower. The high teacher-student ratio made teaching and facilitation of learning different instruments challenging despite the use of peer leaders, restricting the amount of personalised assistance provided during the informal learning sessions. Comparing between the learning progress of the Express and Normal Technical streams, Glenn observed that teacher-student ratio impacted more on learning outcomes than the general ability of the students:

> . . . in the class of 40 students, I mean to help each and every group . . . I think another person will be pretty helpful in the classroom.
>
> Actually the Normal Tech class is not that different from this (Express) class. In fact, they are a little bit better because it is a very small class and there is more focus on them. There (are) only 32 people in that class . . . for this one it's about 40. So that is the difference.

Outside teaching hours in the afternoon, teachers were often occupied with school meetings, CCA and other duties which took them away from students who came requesting for help:

> Mitch: I . . . have more students coming to me asking to rehearse outside school time. And my time after school time is taken up with meetings and . . . I (also) have to sit in the band room and watch my band instructor conduct. That's going to take time away from my students.

Space. To help students who needed more practice time after music class, Glenn and Mitch tried to give students access to the music room after school. This was however fraught with challenges as the music rooms were shared with CCA groups which were active in the afternoons. To resolve this, both teachers established an after-school loan system for instruments and provided access to the music room if it was unoccupied. They reported positive response from the students, who asked to borrow instruments in the afternoons even during exam periods – to rehearse or simply play in their small little groups at various venues on a daily basis.

High on Glenn's wish list was a dedicated music room with individual studios, in which students could focus on their own projects:

> A larger more divided space, like . . . individual spaces for groups to rehearse because one of the key problems my students face is that some of them naturally request to go outside the classroom because they need the space (and) the quiet(ness) to really work within their groups. Because I have to cramp forty kids (in class) and they're playing their own things it's quite disruptive.

Student Disposition

Student disposition towards popular music learning was enhanced by involving and engaging them directly in ways that improve motivation and attitude.

Student role modelling and peer tutoring. Learning interactively and dynamically within a social context, where students worked as a class and in groups with peer leaders that contributed as tutors was cited as creating a positive impact on students' motivation and attitude towards popular music learning. The teachers felt that their students learned better in social groups due to positive peer pressure and peer tutoring, as they found them responding better to their friends' advice rather than their own:

> Mitch: I try to use peer tutoring. I think they respond better if one of their peers is . . . (playfully) punching them saying, 'Come on, hurry up let's get this thing done,' rather than the teacher standing there telling them the same thing.

Providing opportunities for role models and peer leaders to emerge also created positive peer pressure and supported self-esteem and student engagement:

> Cherie: I thought . . . let them have a bit of show time . . . I think it helps . . . esteem wise . . . helps the boys feel good . . . to have the chance to teach the class something . . .

> Glenn: I try to . . . mention him more often because it shows the class that . . . everybody can do it, it's just a matter of experience . . . he's no different from the rest of you guys, so . . . over time you guys can do it as well.

More accomplished students were singled out or invited to demonstrate and tutor their peers. These additional roles placed upon them were on a voluntary basis; they were not pressurized if they were not willing. In this way, they could decide on the way they contribute and learn, which brings on the next point on ownership of learning.

Ownership of learning. The teachers felt that their students learn better when their personal preferences, opinions and decisions were respected and when they were comfortable with their learning tasks. Mitch shared on his students' narrow field of interest and poor performance when removed from their comfort zone and not given their preferred instrument:

> There's probably about eight students that are mad keen (to) drum. I just recently set them an assessment where everybody has to sing for me a part of the song. And those boys just don't want to do it and they blame everything they can, not to actually do it.

On the other hand, when students were given the freedom to choose their own songs and group mates and to create their own arrangements, a high level of student engagement was observed in all classes, a phenomenon which Glenn rationalized:

> Students have higher levels of engagement because . . . they have hands-on, they can discuss, they do it at their own pace . . . they are not pressured to perform exceptionally and they are not punished for failing. It's not a one size fits all programme whereby . . . you have to strum a certain way or else. They really can manoeuvre around and decide what they feel comfortable with and as long (as) they achieve their goals . . . that's good.

Compared to earlier weeks of mostly formal teaching, students were observed to be more engaged and motivated in later weeks when given the freedom to immerse in their own music-making. This freedom invited collaboration and support between groups rather than competition. Students from different groups were seen assisting each other during rehearsals and giving mutual encouragement during performances.

School Disposition

The teachers discussed how school leadership and school culture impacted on their ability to craft and deliver their popular music programmes in ways that they felt would best develop and engage their students.

School leadership. Autonomy and trust from school leaders empowered the teachers to implement what they felt were the most suitable music programmes for their students. Their school leaders gave them the liberty to shape the music curriculum as long as there were evidences of improved student learning and engagement:

> Mitch: The main thing the leadership team is interested in is – are the students engaged in that? Are they enjoying the lessons? They keep getting feedback from the students that they're having fun and they enjoy what they're doing.

> Glenn: The main concern of the leaders is whether the students are musically engaged in the classroom, and evidences of such engagement. In terms of deliverables . . . it's not just student output. They are judging it by . . . how the students enjoy.

These 'evidences' include observations of students' engagement in class, students performing at school events, and students making music after school for personal enjoyment. Glenn felt that his school leaders understood that most students in the school possessed no formal music training and popular music was what they could best relate to. They trusted and supported him by providing him with the necessary resources to initiate his popular music programme.

The fact that music grades do not impact on students' final achievement scores and promotion status also afforded the teachers more flexibility in deciding teaching strategies and criteria for achievement with less intervention from school leaders.

School music culture. In addition to GMP offered to lower Secondary students, the Singapore school music experience is also supported by music CCAs and Arts Enrichment Programmes (AEP), which include school-wide music assembly programmes, workshops and excursions. They provide multi-faceted musical experiences and perspectives through which music learning can be interwoven and reinforced. As teaching and learning about popular music relies on the interplay between formal and informal school music activities and between music found within and beyond the school (Ho, 2014), this network becomes a means for that to occur. The teachers tapped on the possibilities of such synergy between music programmes within and beyond the music classroom, and their attempts include:

1. Complementing the music CCAs by giving students opportunities to use their learning from these CCAs in their popular music projects in personal ways. Some of these students naturally emerged as peer leaders in the classroom while helping their friends, and were seen using their CCA instruments in their pop band performances. Compared to the more formal, drill-and-practice and results-driven culture prevalent in these competitive CCAs, the popular music lessons gave students more time and space to use their musical skills more creatively and expressively, in ways where they had more ownership:

   > Mitch: My concern is that the band and choir . . . seem to be quite . . . restricted . . . and old fashioned. I just thought that I would never drill drill drill . . . I'm hoping that maybe this (popular music programme) might open ears a little more to pay attention to that sort of things – better phrasing and things like that.

2. Providing opportunities for students outside music CCAs to engage in music performances. For these students who might be musically talented or skilled, the

popular music programme also provided a platform for them to showcase their talents. In fact, the teachers discovered several talented students from non-music CCAs as a result of the programme:

> Mitch: The point on the music talents not in music CCAs is really important. I've got a bunch of netball girls who are great guitar players. It took me a while to realise that musical talent is actually spread a lot more.

Through the experience of creating and performing in the music class, Glenn also hoped that these students would have a better appreciation of musical performances:

> I hope they will have a new-found appreciation of what they do because they have gone through the difficulties of playing in a group . . . so perhaps if they did not really respect those types of performances . . . after going through what they did they might have a new-found respect and appreciation for that.

3. Showcasing better performers at school-wide assembly programmes and community events, as a means to set an authentic target for students to strive towards, and to legitimise what was done in class through wider recognition. Students became recognised for their musical abilities due to this initiative, which helped to create a positive impact on the school's music culture:

> Cherie: there are a lot of competitions . . . out there that engages students in popular song writing . . . we participated in a song writing competition for the environment . . .
>
> Glenn: There's this one boy in secondary two who made quite a reputation of being a good singer now. The choir in our school was an all-girl choir and they're starting to make changes . . . now a few boys emerged.
>
> Mitch: We recently did the assembly programme which was all done by our secondary two students (and) a secondary one class.

Summary

Given the established benefits that popular music programmes can provide to the teaching and learning of music, this study has highlighted several factors that may enable the success and effectiveness of such programmes through the lenses of three Singapore music teachers. In so doing, they shared the extent to which informal learning could be incorporated into a formal educational setting, given the challenges and potential conflicts with official curricular requirements, pedagogical methods, culture and logistical issues, within Singapore's unique educational context.

In particular, though informal learning is regarded as the essence of popular music learning, the teachers still viewed formal teaching as an essential component within the overall curriculum structure. The challenge, therefore, is to balance and interweave both without losing the essence of popular music learning. Resources were mostly discussed as constraints by the teachers, which suggests more resource support is needed to improve the quality of teaching and learning. As the resource provision of most Singapore schools is similar, it might be worthwhile to discover if other teachers with similar resource issues feel similar constraints. Student-directed learning in group settings and teacher autonomy were cited as important enabling factors. Making links between popular music lessons, CCA and AEP served to create relevance and promote authentic learning by enacting an interwoven tapestry of varied experiences that amplify musical learning and understanding.

It might be worthwhile for future researchers to explore the implementation of popular music programmes in more schools in Singapore, particularly primary schools, and to compare their implementation with that of similar programmes in other countries, to inform the differences arising from cultures and contexts. Framed with these perspectives, studies may be conducted on the kind of professional development and governmental support needed to improve student learning and engagement in similar programmes.

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Notes

1 General Music Programme (Ministry of Education, 2015) in Singapore refers to music taught to all pupils in public schools in curriculum time. It currently spans six Primary and two Secondary school levels, for a total of eight years.

2 This study is part of a broader research project titled ‘Learning through popular music, lessons for the General Music Programme (GMP) syllabus in Singapore’, which is funded by a grant awarded by the Office of Education Research, the National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. Its overarching aim is to research ways in which popular music education may be most effectively explored, enthused, enabled and engaged towards musical development, identity formation and socio-cultural negotiation in multicultural Singapore.

3 Singapore’s education system separates Secondary level students into different streams based on their Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) results. The Secondary Express stream offers a four-year course that leads up to the Singapore-Cambridge General Certificate of Education (Ordinary Level) Examination.

4 The Normal Technical stream offers a four-year course leading up to the Singapore-Cambridge General Certificate of Education Normal (Technical Level) Examination. Compared to the Express stream, students take subjects of a more technical nature and generally proceed to vocational education institutions after graduation.

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