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Helping Students Overcome Musical Inhibition: Perspectives of Instrumental Teachers in Malaysia and Singapore

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Abstract

Although musical inhibition is well known in music education, it has not been studied extensively. This may result in misdiagnosis of student experience. In this paper, we examine how teachers have described the ways they help students overcome musical inhibition. Using a basic qualitative research design, we conducted semi-structured interviews with twelve studio piano teachers from Singapore and Malaysia. The themes that emerged from the data showed that in order to help students overcome musical inhibition, teachers foster personal relationships within the students' learning environment, increase student ownership of their learning, and develop students' confidence in their musical abilities. This shows that teachers intuitively grasped the basic needs for motivation in musically inhibited students and attempted to address this through their previous teaching experiences. The results suggest that understanding the relationship between motivation and inhibition will support music teachers in helping students who display symptoms of musical inhibition.

Introduction

This article examines how studio music teachers address instances of musical inhibition they encounter in their students. In a companion article that stems from the same study and data (Ang et al., 2022), we defined the concept of musical inhibition as “limiting a child’s potential ability to receive or produce music due to intra-personal, relational, experiential, or environmental factors” (p. 3). We demonstrate in that article that, according to our participants, such inhibition mainly occurs when parents and/or teachers place undue pressure on music students or use approaches that could be termed abusive. Participants described parents who have unrealistic goals and who are competitive and controlling, as well as teachers who are militaristic, threatening, abusive, and fierce; this in turn may cause trauma, loss of interest, and loss of confidence in children who are learning musical instruments. While these findings are not an exhaustive description of the possible causes of musical inhibition (for example, the difficulties of motor learning may impact on a student’s ability to express themselves), they point to the need for further research to understand the phenomenon.

Research on parental pressure such as we have described is limited; Creech and Hallam (2003) found no research about conflict in the parent-teacher-pupil triad. Indeed, when parents are asked about their children’s musical journeys, they position themselves as supportive and involved (Davidson & Scutt, 1999; Ho, 2009). We found that in Malaysia, parents’ roles as consumers sometimes clashed with their supportive roles; parents can demand outcomes, such as passes or distinctions in music examinations, because they believe they have paid for a

specific outcome (Ang et al., 2023). Bai (2021) suggests that some parents in China might push children to pursue piano studies in order to bolster their CV, a tendency exacerbated by the high university entrance examination requirements. In both these cases the music examination is not supportive of musical development but used as a tool to acquire social capital. Such parental pressure is not limited to Asian countries; research in Australia (Cheng & Southcott, 2016) and Canada (Mitchell, 2017) also mentions undue parental pressure limiting the musical development of some students. However, teachers can have an equally destructive impact on their students.

Our research participants in Malaysia and Singapore all indicated they are aware of some cases of abusive teaching (Ang et al., 2022) that negatively affects the musical development of students. Literature from different parts of the world highlights that the phenomenon we describe is a global problem. In Turkey, Özevin (2022) found that from a sample of 902 university students, more than a quarter reported emotional abuse in music classes, and between 5% and 10% suffered physical abuse from music teachers. In Europe, Smilde (2009) provides biographical details of some instances of abusive behaviour that her participants have experienced from teachers. Sun and Leung (2014) show that all the music teachers of their sample of 674 school children in north-eastern China made use of corporal punishment, and 30% of the children claimed that their teachers “never positively recognised their students during class” (p. 449). This overview of the limited research on the topic suggests that abuse and violence occur in music classrooms and studios across the globe. We contend that some of the effects of such abuse, including what we have termed musical inhibition, will also be observable in most places worldwide.

An interesting question is why parental pressure, violence, abuse, and musical inhibition are not more widely researched, given such wide distribution. Fernández-Morante (2018), drawing on the work of Kingsbury (2001) and Nettle (1995), among others, suggests, that the subject of violence is taboo in music circles due to the “conception of Western musical art as a kind of religious system” (p. 15 translated from the original Spanish work by Google Translate). Some might say, for example, that the self-evident beauty of the music must mean that people who make beautiful music will be ennobled by it and be incapable of anything but exemplary behaviours (Cheng, 2019). Such a taboo limits the kinds of questions that can be asked by researchers (see Odendaal et al, 2020 for a similar issue in memory studies). Another related issue we have identified is the ethical and practical difficulties of accessing perpetrators of such pressure and violence, or getting victims to be willing to speak frankly, especially if they are still studying with such a teacher, or living at a home where such pressure exists (Ellsberg & Heise, 2002).

A further question is why such abusive teaching behaviour is so prevalent. This behaviour stems partly from a culture of violence that has been perpetuated in conservatories for many

decades (Fernández-Morante, 2018). However, in Malaysia and Singapore, many music teachers have not undergone any conservatory or university training (Ang, et al., 2023), and it may be that lack of teacher training and deficient pedagogical skills are equally responsible for behaviour that leads to musical inhibition.

This study was motivated by our own experiences of encountering students unable to express their musicality appropriately after having music lessons, and our frustration of not knowing how to approach teaching in such situations. Although musical inhibition is widespread and well known in the musical industry, it has not been widely researched or understood. We have not been able to identify literature that directly addresses musical inhibition, nor methods of rehabilitation. As a result, we have also observed other teachers who misdiagnose the issue and, for example, think that the student is not working hard enough, or is perhaps “untalented.” In these cases, the teachers do not adapt their teaching appropriately to the needs of the students. Hence, we aimed in this basic qualitative research study (Merriam, 2002) to understand how twelve private music teachers in Singapore and Malaysia describe their attempts to help students overcome musical inhibition.

Research Context

Malaysia and Singapore are neighbouring countries in South-East Asia with similar languages and cultures. Our observation is that most of the formal instrumental music education in both countries is through instrumental music studies at private music schools or the studios of private piano teachers (see Abdullah (2021) for a description of the situation in Malaysia). This is the case despite both countries implementing a compulsory general music curriculum at primary level in public schools (Abdullah, 2021; Stead & Lum, 2014). International schools in both countries also offer instrumental music education, as do secondary schools in Singapore. Most private piano teachers prepare their students for British examination boards’ music examinations, and Malaysia and Singapore are two of the world’s largest markets for these examinations (Ang, 2013). The Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music (ABRSM), Trinity College London (TCL), and the London College of Music (LCM) are popular external examination boards in these two countries.

Many parents and teachers use the above music examination system to set goals towards developing as musicians for their children and students. However, we have also observed that the examinations are used by some parents and teachers to boost their own reputation or to supplement the child’s extracurricular activities to enhance the child’s portfolio so that they may gain entrance to prestigious schools. In some cases, parents and teachers prioritise the latter ahead of the former. This often happens because examination results and certificates are highly valued as goals in themselves rather than milestones on the path to musical maturity.

Mianzi, a Chinese word literally meaning “face,” is important in much of Malaysia and

Singapore, and entails gaining the “admiration of others by making one’s successes or abilities known to them” (Hwang et al., 2003, p. 74). Social status and prestige are linked to “face,” and therefore examination certificates become a path for some to increase what are felt to be desirable characteristics. Students’ responses to comparison and judgement in such an environment frequently include a loss of interest and confidence, shyness, and poor performance, all of which we understand as part of musical inhibition, akin to the notion of inhibition in other psychological research (Rubin, 2001).

Procedures

Research Design and Approach

This study followed a basic qualitative research approach (Merriam, 2002) which makes use of individual interviews with participants in order to understand the ways in which they make sense of their teaching experiences, in this case, related to assisting students overcome musical inhibition.

Participants

Purposive sampling was used to identify twelve experienced piano teachers; six from Singapore, and six from the Klang Valley in West Malaysia. We chose teachers as participants because we thought they would have a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon of inhibition, both through direct observation of their students and through discussions with colleagues. We limited participants to piano teachers because they are the most numerous subgroup of music teachers in these specific research sites. We aimed to find a representative sample of participants who teach Western classical, jazz, and popular music, or a combination of these genres. The participants were asked to select pseudonyms based on the name of a famous piano pedagogue or performer to protect their identities and preserve confidentiality (see Table 1).

Table 1*Pseudonyms and Backgrounds of Participants*

Pseudonym	Location	Years of Teaching	Genres Taught	Age Group Taught
Aisling	Malaysia	> 3 decades	Classical and improvisation	4 to 14 years old
Alice	Singapore	> 1 decade	Classical	3 to 15 years old
Elina	Malaysia	> 4 decades	Classical	5 to 70 years old
Emma	Malaysia	> 2 decades	Classical and popular music	3 years old to adults
Fleisher	Singapore	> 2 decades	Classical and improvisation	3-14 years old
Gordon	Malaysia	> 3 decades	Classical and popular music	6 to over 50 years old
Khatia	Singapore	> 3 decades	All genres such as pop and jazz, but mainly Classical	6 to 18 years old
Leon	Malaysia	> 4 decades	Jazz, popular and Classical	7 to 24 years old
Nadia	Malaysia	> 2 decades	Classical and popular music	5 to over 50 years old
Tiffany	Singapore	> 2 decades	Classical and improvisation	4 to 14 years old
Vladimir	Singapore	> 3 decades	Church music and Classical	8 to over 60 years old
Yuja	Singapore	> 2 decades	Classical	8 to 18 years old

Data Collection

We chose interviews over direct observations because of the sensitive nature of the research topic. We did not want to offend or upset teachers by suggesting that they themselves might be impeding their students' musicality, nor place students in their studios in a difficult position if they were on the receiving end of such inhibition-inducing behaviours. As a result, we gave participants four fictional stories (Kallio, 2015) about musical inhibition before the interview. The fictional stories ([Appendix A](#)) were based on the experiences of the researchers, combined with fictional elements to conceal identities. These stories depict different sources of inhibition that the researchers found most salient and recurrent in the general psychology literature on inhibition (de Moor et al., 2018; Macleod, 2007; Pérez-Edgar & Fox, 2018; Rubin, 2001), such as abusive teaching, inborn shyness, parental pressure, and lack of parental support or interest. The fictional stories were intended to expose participants

to relatable situations to help them reveal values that they were perhaps unable to articulate without the help of a prompt. In a previous study, fictional stories proved helpful in interview situations in Malaysian culture, where high respect for authority and the need to “save face” may limit the openness with which questions can be answered (Ang, et al., 2020).

Furthermore, because the stories discussed the experiences of others, they reduced the participants’ feelings of being accused or entrapment. We used a question guide in the semi-structured interviews ([Appendix B](#)) as a starting point for the discussion, after which we invited participants to reflect on the fictional stories. The interviews were therefore open, and we aimed to allow the participants to feel they could share their experiences and tell their stories freely.

Data Analysis

We used ATLAS.ti to code the transcribed interviews inductively through a collaborative online coding process. The first and second authors independently coded the data from their respective interviews using this software, while the third author independently coded all the interviews in a similar manner. Initial coding, theoretical coding, and data theming were used (Saldaña, 2021). The team collated their coding and then used a consensus-seeking process to combine these three codings into a final coding. Following this, we collaboratively developed a theoretical understanding of the major themes in the study based on the coding.

In this paper we present three themes that describe ways in which teachers support students to help overcome musical inhibition. Teachers foster personal relationships with students, increase student ownership of their learning, and develop students’ confidence in their musical abilities. Other themes related to the symptoms and causes of inhibition are discussed in a separate article (Ang, et al., 2022).

Trustworthiness

The interview transcriptions and preliminary results were presented to the participants for feedback to enhance the trustworthiness of the data (Creswell, 2013). None of the participants requested that the transcriptions or results be altered.

Ethics

Participants were all adults who teach piano in Singapore or the Klang Valley of West Malaysia. We followed the ethical guidelines of our institutions, which align with international best practice (American Psychological Association, 2017). Each participant consented to an interview, conducted at a location of their choice. Prior to the interview, the participants were provided with a brief description of the research project, and they signed a written consent document that detailed the nature of their involvement and their rights. Participants were free to withdraw their consent at any point of the research process. Material that could aid in identifying participants’ identities was removed from verbatim quotations.

The ethics review committees of the researchers' institutions approved the study prior to data collection.

Findings

The interviews indicated that music teachers relied on their teaching approach, the parents of their students, the learning environment created at the student's home, and the overall mindset towards examinations to assist and support musically inhibited students. The common themes that we extracted from the analysis of the interviews showed that the measures that teachers employed to help their students overcome musical inhibition were: to foster personal relationships within the students' learning environment; to increase student ownership of their learning; and to develop students' confidence in their musical abilities.

Foster personal relationships with students: "It's not [...] like you're alone in everything"

Our analysis suggests that teachers are responsible for developing a student's sense of belonging to the music studio by giving positive reinforcement, nurturing the parent-child relationship, working with each student's unique personality, and encouraging ensemble playing. By these means, they provide a sense of security enabling a student to overcome their musical inhibition.

A personal relationship with students is nurtured through communication, which includes knowing how to give *positive reinforcement*. Emma would never say that a student is not musical because musicality "can be encouraged and ... built on" (8:26).¹ She also mentioned the importance acknowledging students' feelings and experiences, as that can enhance trust between the teacher and the student, which in turn strengthens a students' sense of belonging to the studio. This was seen in a case where her validating a transfer student's feelings after experiences of abuse by a former teacher helped the student overcome the trauma (8:15). Music could be a common area of interest shared between parent and child, and thus a basis for *nurturing the parent-child relationship*. The guidance provided by the parent can help the child overcome any apprehension he or she may have towards what may be a novel situation of learning music. Leon shared that at times, "the student [initially] comes [for music lessons] because the parent is the one who is interested" (6:31). He shared his personal experience of starting to learn the piano at the age of 10.

¹ Numbers in parentheses after quotations refer to data points within our ATLAS.ti copy bundle. The first number refers to the specific interview, and the second to a specific place in that interview.

I had not got a clue [then] what that was all about. My father was the one who actually pushed me to play [the] piano because my father was a self-taught violinist [and] guitarist. He played all kinds of instruments, all by ear. He loves music very much (6:31).

For Leon, his father's interest rubbed off on him, and he eventually became a passionate music teacher.

Being able to *work with each student's unique personality* is also crucial to students' feelings of belonging and being valued. Gordon stressed that

[There are] a lot more psychological aspects than the teacher probably [realises] ... As I tutor, I should have encouraged them. Or rather, I should have explored that part with them instead of just [talking] about the musicality per se (7:20).

Finally, Leon added that *ensemble playing* could also reinforce the feelings of togetherness a student experiences.

Playing duets is not so ... scary because there's another person playing. So, if one person ... makes a mistake, [it] won't... be so glaring. You blame each other for making the mistake anyway. It's not ... like you're alone in everything (6:6).

These examples suggest that getting past feelings of isolation can help students feel safe, thereby counteracting feelings of fear and shyness stemming from musical inhibition.

Increase student ownership of their learning: "For the pieces that they have chosen [...] they will practise"

We found several teachers who are willing to work with student choices in this study. This includes letting students decide on their repertoire, allowing lessons to be led by students' interests and strengths, and helping students to decide on examination participation to foster a sense of ownership and motivation in their students. They also attempt to shape the family environment to foster creativity.

Most teachers interviewed give students who are inhibited a *choice in repertoire selection*. This can help shy students to become more confident because they are more likely to put in more effort with repertoire that they enjoy and have therefore chosen. Emma notices that "certain pieces they may choose not to play but for the pieces that they have chosen, they will be disciplined, and they will practise" (8:46). Teachers allow space for the lesson to be led by

the *student's interests and strengths*. Vladimir helped a traumatised student in this manner, and eventually the student “look[ed] forward to seeing it (music) as a fun thing” (5:14). Emma and Fleisher *use examinations to motivate their students* to show their best musical sides in order to score well.

When they think they want to take the exam they will go all the way out and that translates to them trying to express musically as well because they know that will help them to do well (3:23).

However, Gordon cautioned that the narrow perspectives that parents and teachers adopt can limit student ownership of their learning, especially when examinations come into the picture.

The [objective] of a lot of lessons being delivered is towards ‘How do I pass?’... ‘How do I just get my 101, rather than 95? ... [instead of] ‘How do I play better Chopin?’... ‘How do I play a better Debussy?’ (7:26).

Alice observed that this results in students advancing “according to marking criteria, without really understanding or listening or developing a musical ear” (4:15), and the resultant pressure to score well could generate fear or suppress musical expression. These teachers recognise the negative impact of such teaching decisions and work to rather increase their students’ ownership of the learning process, also with regard to the examination situation. Tiffany thought that parents could encourage their children to take ownership of their own learning by *shaping the family environment to foster curiosity*. “I think the family upbringing plays a part ... if [students] are ... encouraged to talk and express what they are thinking ... then there’s a higher chance that they will be more comfortable doing that” (1:19). On the other hand, Alice described a student whom she felt was musically hampered by her home environment.

So, I have this girl from a big ... [and] conservative religious family. She is very reserved... I think she’s capable of expressing [as] I also noticed when sometimes the father or mother is not around in the lesson, she’s more outspoken and she becomes more cheerful ... and she talks more (4:29).

Thus, the teachers understand that the home environment plays an important part in whether a child feels and expresses a sense of freedom in the choices made in the music lessons. The above instances illustrate how some teachers use a student’s own choice of music to help the students to overcome musical inhibition, as such choice can help transform students’ perceptions of fear and apprehension about their learning into joy and a motivation to express themselves musically.

Develop students' confidence in their musical abilities: "To express themselves and to gain confidence"

Several of the participants aimed to develop the confidence of their inhibited students by strengthening their technical foundations, creating safe environments for performance, scaffolding the student's progress into achievable goals, and building their resilience through parental encouragement. Fleischer pointed out that many students fall short of their musical and expressive best because of a lack of strong technical grounding (3:22). As a result, their self-esteem suffers. He suggested that teachers and students need to *take time to develop a strong technical foundation*. Other teachers, such as Leon and Nadia, *create safe environments for students to perform* to their family and peers before performing for larger crowds (6:4) and encourage students to simulate a performance by self-recording (11:17). When students are able to make music confidently, it sets up a positive cycle of success. In contrast, when students cannot make music confidently, it sets in motion a vicious cycle of deepening inhibition.

What is essential is that teachers are themselves competent enough to be able to *scaffold the student's progress into achievable goals*. Yuja pointed out that the student will become overwhelmed otherwise.

There's so many things to look into [in] just a phrase itself. So, if it's a piece that's like a couple of hundred bars, I think it's overwhelming for them and too much focus ... If it's a short piece, they do it very nicely. And [then] you slowly increase the length. I think it will be better. (12:35)

Khatia accomplished the same thing by pacing the examination grade slightly below the students' actual levels.

I will challenge them to the limit of their ability. Then after that, if I say okay, most probably they can take the exam ... I will lower it a bit so that ... the most important, basic thing they will capture first ... The [examination] platform ... is very ... important for them to ... express themselves and also to gain confidence. (2:24)

Gordon emphasised that the self-esteem-boosting effects of successful examinations are apparent only when the examination level is appropriate for the students' actual level of performance, saying, "when you are ready, the examiner comes" (7:26).

Parents can help students become more competent by building their *resilience through parental encouragement*. Alice noted that the chance for students to develop musical inhibition as a consequence of trauma could thus be reduced.

If their family and friends are more encouraging, it will be easier for them (students) to go on. I think it's very important [as it] makes them a stronger person ... have a stronger heart to take criticism, whether it's constructive or just mean critics (4:30).

It was observed that a competent teacher is able to set achievable goals for students. The achievement of these goals not only triggers a positive cycle, as mentioned earlier, but also increases the motivation to practise more (12:23).

Discussion

The common themes developed through the analysis of the interviews showed that the measures that teachers employed to support their students in overcoming musical inhibition were: to foster personal relationships within the students' learning environment; increase student ownership of their learning; and develop students' confidence in their musical abilities. These findings align well with the three basic psychological needs for relatedness, autonomy and competence as posited by Ryan and Deci (2018). Self-determination theory (SDT) claims that fulfilling the three basic psychological needs is central to developing healthy intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2018). Our analysis suggests that several teachers intuitively understand the significance of building self-determination and intrinsic motivation when they describe how to support a student who has experienced some level of musical inhibition. This is true even if none of them explicitly drew on the theory or address each aspect of the basic psychological needs. Some teachers in our study (Aisling and Elina) had nothing to say on this matter. This omission highlights the importance of continued discussion of factors relating to motivation and self-determination in music teaching, especially in the context of Singapore and Malaysia, but very likely in other parts of the world as well.

The links between learning, self-determination and motivation are well established in music education literature. For example, for students to have a positive piano learning experience they need to have supportive relationships with important adults combined with an intrinsic motivation to learn (Mitchell, 2017). Within this environment, an experience of positive evaluation that enhances mastery as a goal is likely to support self-efficacy and self-determination (Hruska, 2011). Such a supportive approach stands in stark contrast to the literature reviewed earlier in the chapter demonstrating violence and abuse in studios and classrooms around the world (Özevin, 2022; Smilde, 2009; Sun & Leung, 2014). In what follows we briefly discuss the three basic psychological needs as they relate to our findings.

Relatedness is the desire to feel close and connected to others, through feelings of belonging and acceptance (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Social inhibition partly stems from a low sense of belonging (de Moor et al., 2018), which the teachers in this study attempted to address through positive communication with students, and by creating bonds through making music together. Several teachers also recognised that parental relationships are important, and while teachers have little influence on the parent-child relationship, the relationship remains an important factor from the teacher's perspective in supporting or limiting the child's musical development. Undue pressure from parents has been shown to limit musical development (Ang, et al., 2023; Bai, 2021; Cheng & Southcott, 2016; Mitchell, 2017), and part of supporting a child's musical development is ensuring that the parents are well informed about the dangers of unnecessary pressure.

Autonomy is behaviour that is "congruent with the sense of self" which arises with "feelings of volition, choice and being the cause of one's behaviour" (Evans, 2015, p. 70). Teachers, parents, and other adults are able to support the growth of healthy autonomy by encouraging the coping and adaptive skills of children, thereby minimising certain forms of behavioural inhibition over time (Reynolds et al., 2018). The participating teachers also attempted to support the autonomy of their students by offering them repertoire choices and working with the interests and strengths of the student, which is in line with the approach suggested by Renwick and Reeve (2012).

Competence beliefs play a central role in students' intrinsic motivation (Küpers et al., 2014). In contrast, experiences of extreme difficulty or a sense of inability thwart motivation, leading to feelings of ineffectiveness (Evans, 2015). In this study, teachers enhance a sense of competence in their students by building technical fluency, by providing opportunities for students to engage in positive performance experiences such as performing for a familiar audience in a safe environment, and being part of an ensemble so that the student does not perform alone. It was also important that teachers set achievable goals for students, for instance, only entering students for examination grades that were appropriate for their level (Hruska 2011).

This analysis suggests that musical inhibition is strongly related to poor motivation. The concepts, however, do not overlap entirely. In the companion paper to this chapter (Ang, et al., 2022) we have identified the symptoms of inhibition as including trauma, loss of interest, and loss of confidence. The principles and tools developed in SDT are appropriate for dealing with these last two symptoms of musical inhibition. However, students who have experienced trauma are more likely to be in need of the kind of professional psycho-social support that music teachers, who are untrained in these matters, cannot offer.

Conclusion and Implications

The role of an instrumental music teacher is much broader than only improving musical performance. Terms such as facilitative teacher (Edgar, 2015), someone who considers mental and social health alongside academic and musical improvement, are appropriate to describe the ideal music teacher. While some people can use their instincts and interpersonal skills to grow towards becoming such facilitative teachers, the best route would be to provide teachers with mentoring and support that assists this development. Part of such support could be helping teachers understand the theoretical perspectives of work done in SDT and music (e.g. Evans & Ryan, 2022). While this may be easier to achieve in contexts where many music teachers are trained at universities, it may be more challenging in contexts such as Malaysia and Singapore, where some teachers work without formal training. Professional development courses may only have limited reach and impact in these contexts and assisting those teachers who want to change through mentoring and teacher support groups may be the best way to slowly transform music education from the inside.

For students who undertake university training, it would be important to include some training in psychology in their degree to assist their management of mental support and the understanding of each individual student's circumstances. Furthermore, it would be important for teachers to have open conversations with parents (Ang, et al., 2019) on this topic, so that they can understand the inhibition-induced experiences of their children better, allowing the children to flourish musically.

Important areas for further research would be to investigate the reach and prevalence of musical inhibition in various parts of the world, including areas such as conflict in the parent-teacher-pupil triad, parental pressure, and the impact of violence and abuse in music education. In addition, the field needs a better understanding of how to support children who have experienced trauma in music their education. While the principles of SDT are well established, it is also necessary to consider how to help music teachers incorporate them effectively into their daily teaching practice.

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A pianist, music educator, researcher and entrepreneur, Dr. Hui Ling Khoo believes that good music is sincere and vulnerable, ideals she infuses into her artistic endeavours. Hui Ling is currently Lecturer at the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music (YST), where she teaches courses in professional development, pedagogy, and community engagement. She is also the founder of The Music Studios, a collective of private music teachers in Singapore with a mission to help every music learner build a lifelong friendship with music. Having a strong conviction to positively impact the music teaching community, she has served on the executive committees of the Singapore Music Teachers' Association and the Southeast Asian Directors of Music (SEADOM) and has been invited to share her research in piano pedagogy at various conferences. She has attained degrees in piano performance and pedagogy from YST, the Peabody Conservatory of Music and the University of Oregon.

Dr. Kathryn Ang has vast experience as a music educator, adjudicator, pianist, and researcher. She holds a doctoral degree in music from the North-West University, a master's degree in piano didactics from the University of Pretoria, and a bachelor's degree in music from the University of Edinburgh. She currently teaches piano performance and pedagogy at professional and tertiary levels. She is an Extraordinary Researcher in the Research Niche Area: Musical Arts in South Africa (MASARA) at the North-West University and a member of two project teams focusing on Music Education and Professionalism. She regularly publishes articles in international music education journals and is a lifetime member of the *Golden Key International Honour Society*.

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Appendix A

Four Factional Stories

Factional Story 1

Margaret was preparing for a major piano performance examination. She could only practise in the evenings as she had a full-time job in a corporate company. She was feeling very stressed about the examination which was in a matter of months, and she was in the midst of memorising the pieces in her programme. As she was practising, her father suddenly appeared.

“Stop playing the piano! Can’t you see I want to watch the tv?” he yelled angrily at her and proceeded to switch on the TV.

Margaret was shocked as she was in the middle of a phrase that she was trying to memorise.

“But Dad, my exam is in a few months’ time. I need to practise!” She begged her father in desperation.

“I don’t care! Your playing is so noisy. You are also disturbing the neighbours!” Her father added in a huff.

“I really need to practise Dad. If I don’t practise, I will fail the exam!” Margaret pleaded again with her father.

“That’s your problem! No one asked you to play the piano, let alone take an exam, when you already have a proper job. What’s the point of it?” her father retorted angrily.

Margaret was miserable as she could not practise under such conditions. At her next piano lesson, she could not play well as she had been traumatised by her father’s negative words. Every time she tried to play her father’s words would resound in her head. She loved music and was passionate about playing the piano, but her progress was slow because of her home environment.

Factional Story 2

Helen looked nervous and was visibly biting her lip as she entered the music studio. Her eyes were darting in many directions as she sat at the piano. It was her first piano lesson with Kay.

In their first conversation a week before Kay had discovered that Helen, a middle-aged student, had failed a major diploma piano examination twice over the course of several years.

“How are you, Helen?” Kay asked in a warm and friendly tone.

“Ok...” She replied hesitantly.

“What would you like to play today?” Kay tried to be encouraging as Helen appeared very tense and uncomfortable.

“Umm...maybe this” Helen replied as she placed her shaking hands over the keyboard. Just as she was about to play, she burst into tears and sobbed audibly without any provocation. Kay was shocked and asked her why she was crying.

“My last teacher used to hit me if I played badly,” she replied through her tears, “he would also shout at me and tell me that I am stupid, slow, and untalented.”

She described the trauma she had experienced with her last piano teacher who was both physically and verbally abusive towards her. This resulted in a great loss of her self-esteem and confidence in playing the piano. She explained that she was in tears because of the fear that had been instilled in her by her previous teacher, who would scream at her every time she played.

“I am afraid that you will do the same thing.” She trembled as she spoke.

Factional Story 3

Yi Ling enjoys music and is a fast learner with a natural technique at the piano. She is able to memorise and perform difficult pieces in a matter of days. She is also gifted academically, consistently emerging as one of the top students in her high school class every year.

Heidi, Yi Ling’s teacher, asked Yi Ling’s mom even before the first lesson whether she had any intention of entering Yi Ling for a piano examination. Yi Ling’s mom, one of the most nurturing and encouraging parents Heidi had encountered, replied that all she wanted was for Yi Ling to have an opportunity for artistic expression, as she had a very shy personality.

Heidi noticed within the initial few lessons with Yi Ling that this shyness was preventing her from expressing her musicality spontaneously.

“What you are playing doesn’t sound bad, but it has the potential to be so much more expressive,” Heidi commented in one lesson.

Yi Ling, biting her lip in cautious hesitation, mumbled, “Actually I do know what I want the piece to sound like.”

“What if you just tried exaggerating the nuances, phrasing, and dynamic contrasts that you hear a bit more? Or perhaps there is a real-life experience you could relate this piece to?”

Heidi suggested.

“I just can’t do it, especially when I know someone is around. And it gets much worse when there are more people listening. I can’t make the sounds I would like to, and it’s so frustrating... maybe I’m just not made to perform.”

Factional Story 4

Wai Kit’s parents come across as very competitive. It seems they will do everything they can to help him to excel in any way. Good results from music examinations were one of the badges of honour they looked for. When he was ten-years old Wai Kit’s mom, Michelle, wanted her son to play his Grade 8 piano examination. His previous teacher thought he was not ready for this examination and was unwilling to register him. Michelle therefore engaged a new teacher, Karen.

During a conversation with Karen, Michelle insisted, “I really want Wai Kit to sit for the Grade 8 examination as soon as possible.”

Karen was taken aback and asked, “Is there a reason why?”

“I’d like him to have an edge over other students as this would increase his chances of getting a scholarship for high school,” Michelle replied.

Karen explained, “I can try, but Wai Kit may not have the musical maturity to take the exam yet. Pushing him to do so when he is not ready may affect his interest and self-confidence in music.”

Karen agreed to teach Wai Kit, but during the first lessons she realised that her initial thoughts were correct. Wai Kit was slow at note reading and coordination, and in the one hour of lessons, Karen had time to only focus on helping Wai Kit find the right notes. He ended up being able to play most of the notes of the examination pieces but could not play them with

clear phrasing or nuance and did poorly in the examination. Three months after the examination, Wai Kit and his parents concluded that Wai Kit was simply not talented in music based on his examination results and stopped his music lessons.

Appendix B

Interview guide for individual interviews:

1. Tell me about your studio. How does it work, who comes, what do you do?
2. If I tell you one of your students is musical, what do you understand me to be saying?
3. Tell me about some of your students who are very musical. What are they like? Do you help them to be more musical?
4. Tell me about some of your students that struggle with being musical. What are they like? How do you try to help them?
5. Do you have students who you feel are musical, but they struggle to express their musicality? Why do you think that happens? What inhibits them?
6. What stops your students from all developing their musicality to the full?
7. What comes to mind when you read this story (referring to one of the fictional stories)

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