INTRODUCTION

“There is a shared belief across Singapore society that education is crucial in building up individual and collective capacity, and in strengthening the cohesiveness of the nation beyond knowledge and skills.’ The education system has realized ‘the need to recognise diverse and complex needs, and allows all to progress in life – not by prescribing one path for all, but to have a diversity of pathways and opportunities, regardless of background.”

(Heng, 2011)

At the Ministry of Education (Singapore) Workplan Seminar in 2011, the Education Minister urged schools to focus on student-centric, values-driven education (Heng, 2011). He went on to share that there was a need to empower schools and teachers so that they could work towards improving the quality of teaching and learning in the classrooms. As schools were beginning to customise their programmes to meet the needs of their students, they were also giving more attention to providing students with authentic learning experiences which included the acquisition of desirable values and relevant skills. The Minister believed that in order to nurture personal values to enable students to have the confidence and self-awareness, it was important to also nurture self-identity. This can be achieved through pedagogies that are student-centric, pedagogies that take into account the students’ strengths and abilities, their interests and aspirations, and give space for creativity and personal expression.

This paper presents the experiences of a primary school music teacher who translated the key observations from a learning journey, to develop music
pedagogies that are student-centric and that nurture self-identity in students. Beginning with the conceptualisation of ideas and a professional development plan, the teacher, Ms Yan, designed a 10-week music curriculum for her students. In her 10-week music lessons, Ms Yan applied the principles of student-centred arts learning to empower her students in decision-making and music-making, and providing opportunities for students' self-discovery. Teaching and learning took on a constructivist approach. Students were nurtured to develop critical, reflective and creative thinking through music-making sessions. Throughout the period of research, the teacher went through frequent deep reflective discussions which enhanced the way she designed her lesson modules, and the outcomes of these decisions made.

**STUDENT-CENTRED MUSIC LEARNING: TRANSLATING TO THE CLASSROOM**

McCombs and Whisler (1997, p. 16; cited in McCombs & Miller, 2007) described student-centred learning to be “the perspective that combines a focus on individual learners – their heredity, experiences, perspectives, backgrounds, talents, interests, capacities and needs – with a focus on the best available knowledge about learning and how it occurs and about teaching practices that promote the highest levels of motivation, learning and achievement for all learners”. For this to take place in the music classroom, the teacher is required to develop strategies that support diverse learner needs and perspectives and provide time for students to reflect critically. The teacher too should be given the opportunity and time to re-create her practices and beliefs about students and instructions. Like the students she teaches, the teacher must be actively involved in her own learning processes in a collaborative process with other educators. This paradigm shift is essential for the success in any student-centred classroom as the teachers challenge the misconceptions about learners and learning and to create improved ways to prepare quality teachers and teaching.

In his book, *Teaching Music Musically*, Swanwick (1999/2012, p. 35) discussed how music educators could help students experience “actual quality of musical encounters”. For this to happen, he informed that there is a “need for radical re-thinking of how time and resources are used.”

**Nurturing Identity Through Song Writing**

In this research, the teacher involved and the school leader started by deciding to review the school's music curriculum. They believed that the teaching of music, like any other subjects taught in the school, could and should be customised to meet the varied needs of their students. This decision to radically re-think and redesign the school's curriculum led the teacher involved to think more about her students' learning needs. The school decided to implement the change at the primary 3 level, with a total of 4 classes. While curriculum time remaining unchanged, there was a need to relook at the resources available as well as on how they could be used more effectively. The planning of the lessons did not just focus on what was to be taught and what activities would best support the teaching and learning. It also included focus on the time and space for the teacher to
reconstruct her beliefs and at the same time re-think about her instructions as she realised that all the above factors would affect her students' learning.

In the early planning stage, Ms Yan identified a specific goal for her students' learning – nurturing identity through song writing. This shift of planning differed from her norm where she used to typically teach music based on musical concepts without having an end in mind. Learning the music of one's own culture, as well as that of others, allows students to understand themselves and their relationship to other cultures. Reimer (1970; cited in Mark and Madura, 2010), in his book *A Philosophy of Music Education*, stated that music should be taught to children in an authentic, comprehensive manner as opposed to devices like arranging music of various cultures to sound like Western music. He opined that this loses the authentic characteristics and meaning of the music and defeats the purpose of teaching the musics of other cultures. Elliot (1995), proposed praxialism, which originated from the Greek philosopher Aristotle's idea of praxis, where action is based on practice rather than theory (cited in Mark & Madura, 2010). The paraxial philosophy describes music as action-based study of music which includes performing, listening, composing, arranging, conducting and creating. It focuses not only on the work of art itself but also in one's experiences when engaged in music-making. Music-making helps students gain self-knowledge, growth and self-esteem. It emphasises the roles that music plays in a variety of societies and the ways that the people of those societies respond to their Musics (McCarthy & Goble, 2002; cited in ibid.). Jorgensen (1997, 2003, 2008; cited in ibid.) recommends guiding principles for music teachers to bring together philosophy and music education practice.

In her book, *Student-Centred Coaching*, Sweeney (2011) shared that in a student-centred model, the primary focus is identifying a target for student learning and teachers would need to emphasise on students' outcomes rather than on the educators' intents. She went on to discuss the need for teachers to also be given professional development in this area in order to better implement student-centred lessons. Before embarking on the research, Ms Yan was engaged in numerous conversations on what student-centred classroom is as well as sessions with a research consultant on how she could carry out her research. Officers from STAR modeled examples of student-centred lessons in a workshop which she attended and eventually, Ms Yan trialed some of the lessons herself. Using the guiding principles of student-centred arts learning which STAR co-created with teacher-leaders, Ms Yan planned and designed a 10-week lesson module in song writing which aimed in nurturing identity among the students. The purpose of using the guiding principles was to, firstly, understand the principles of learner-centred pedagogies with a vision of the desired student dispositions and Music syllabus outcomes to achieve the 21st century competencies in the local context and secondly, be able to use common vocabulary for learner-centred pedagogic practices in her discussions with colleagues at STAR.
DISCUSSION

The project focused primarily on developing students’ sense of identity through music with lessons planned based on the current general music syllabus for primary schools. Particular attention was given to ensure that there were equal opportunities for students to experience music through following the processes of creating, listening and performing, while conscientiously inculcating a sense of identity among them. Ms Yan provided opportunities for students to share about themselves, their family as well as their likes and dislikes. Some students from different nationalities were invited to share on their family activities.

Scaffolding of Music-Making

Swanwick (1999/2012, p. 35) wrote that it was essential that the music classroom is where “the major activities of composing-listening, performing-listening and audience-listening take place”. He proposed that smaller groups rather than whole-class or whole band or whole chorus were necessary for student interaction, musical decision-making and individual choice. He believed that when “people become musically engaged when they regard the activity as meaningful, as authentic” (ibid.). We saw this in Ms Yan’s lessons as she planned to provide opportunities for students to work in small groups to discuss and be involved in musical decision-making. She ensured that all her students’ voices were heard as the final project reflected the group’s collective decision in their composition.

Ample examples were introduced to scaffold the students’ learning during the music lesson. The teacher provided listening exercises for students to be introduced to local singer-songwriters, Dick Lee and Corrine May. She even composed a song, “I Like…” and performed it to the class to enthuse them about song writing. To her, the listening exercises provided the students “with relevant examples that would be the foundation of their song writing lessons”. She chose these local artists as examples not just to introduce them as personalities but also to inform the students on how the works of local composers impact the nation as these artists wrote and sang songs to promote National Education. These songs are widely sung by the nation during Singapore’s National Day celebration.

Flow of Lesson

In her planning, Ms Yan also paid very close attention to the flow of each lesson. Besides selecting materials to support her larger objective of helping students inculcate identity among themselves, these materials also supported the learning of the music concepts such as pulse, rhythm and ostinato. She ensured that there was a thread that ran through the lessons and strung the learning together. An example of how she created the flow while bearing in mind the intent of nurturing students’ self-identity, was through the introduction of singing games as a tuning-in activity. She then organised the class into smaller groups where as a group, they replaced the lyrics using words to describe what they liked and presented their work to the class. This became a building block for the students in song writing as well as developing their sense of identity. The experiences provided the
students with more examples to what and how they could create. With the teacher focused on song writing and inculcating identity, the students were given opportunities to explore new vocabulary and rhythmic patterns that could be potentially suitable for their song writing that they would embark on later in the series of lessons. These bite-size experiences and scaffolding were essential to allow students to learn in stages and to be provided with sufficient experiences to nurture identity.

**Providing Feedback, Asking Questions**

Providing feedback to her students for improvement in learning was important to the teacher. She believed that students should be given the opportunity to share their thoughts and comment aloud about another person’s work. To help the students in acquiring the skill of providing constructive feedback, Ms Yan role-modeled the way feedback was given. She demonstrated to the class by giving constructive comments to students for the class to take note of. She would then encourage the students to emulate her questioning and try asking new questions. In group performances, Ms Yan would provide students with opportunities to ask each performing group questions or provide comments. Here, she would take on the role of a facilitator where she would mediate the question or probe further to provide clarity to her students. In group discussions, Ms Yan would make her rounds to each group to observe their progress as well as to check on understanding. She would provide input to the discussion when deemed necessary.

Besides asking questions to check on students’ understanding, the teacher asked students questions to find out what they knew about song writing. She then taught the lesson based on what they know and further developed their understanding by giving them tasks to complete. Questions also helped to understand the reasons for the students’ choices and generated thinking among the group members. For example in a group song writing exercise, the students were supposed to add in 4-beat rhythmic patterns to their composition. A group was having difficulty with the 2nd phrase and was short of a beat. Teacher asked the group why they decided on using the rhythm for the second phrase in the song. She then got the group to clap the pattern as they chanted the verse to her. She too clapped the pattern as they chanted the verse. While watching the teacher, the students realised that the phrase was short of a beat and proceeded to make changes accordingly. Building on the responses given by the students, it was observed that teacher would sometimes prod and ask the students to explain further to clarify.

Sufficient wait time would be given for students to formulate their answers and respond to her. In such an interactive learning environment, the teacher usually endeavoured to ask open-ended questions that provided opportunities for the students to articulate their understanding and also provided her with her students’ insights. They also promoted higher-level thinking on the part of the students. Her responses to them were always positive and encouraging and this motivated the students to become an active participant in her class. Ms Yan shared that by asking her students questions, their responses informed her of her own teaching.
Such a learning environment provided a dialogue that went beyond teacher questions and student answers. In facilitating another group, she asked the group members to suggest ways to improve the quality of their composition. In response to her questioning, the group added layers to the original song. In their final performance, they had a percussion part and a rhythmic ostinato part to accompany the singing of the song. When asking questions, it was noted that the teacher would also ensure that the class listened to the speaker’s contribution or response. She frequently reminded the class of one of the school’s core value which was ‘respect’. The teacher was always mindful that the work must be the students’ and final decision would be agreed and made by the group. Such routine encouraged students to share their thinking aloud and with confidence.

**Reflection**

With the understanding that reflection is an important component in a student-centred music lesson, Ms Yan used various forms of reflection to help her students improve in their class performance. It was observed that there were two processes of reflection in the classroom – the students’ as well as the teacher’s – that ensured success in learning in the classroom. As a reflective practitioner, Ms Yan would make necessary changes to facilitate effective learning in her classroom. By monitoring her students’ progress on an ongoing process, the teacher also constantly provides opportunities for student input in an effort to assess the depth of their understanding. As a facilitator to the students’ learning, the teacher enables the students to figure things out for themselves by suggesting directions or information to those in need of assistance. To the teacher, reflection-in-action (Schön, 1983, 1987) allowed her to make changes in her lesson delivery as she taught the class. For the students, reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action allowed them to improve their quality of work and thinking that was generated through discussion in the group. She encouraged her students to make changes for improvement as they worked on their project.

In her music lessons, students were taught to contribute and share their ideas. They were seen performing their composition in their small groups and making changes as they worked on it. Students also acquired reflection-on-action skills as they went through Ms Yan’s lessons. Groups were also encouraged to peer evaluate. With the use of rubrics that were co-constructed as a class, the students were clear of the expectations in their work. Peer evaluation allowed students to work on the group dynamics that would eventually show improvement in the quality of work produced. Self evaluation provided each individual the time to reflect on their thinking and performance. The teacher frequently encouraged students to reflect on their work. She made time for students to reflect their learning at the end of each lesson. Believing that thinking should be made visible, the teacher encouraged all students to pen their thoughts in a journal that was given to them. The teacher shared that assessment for learning also allowed her to check on students’ understanding of the musical concepts taught.
Creating a Conducive Environment

As Ms Yan identified her music classroom to be the hub where students spend many hours learning music and making music together, she ensured that not only would she have to determine goals for their learning, she would also need to create a conducive environment for their learning. It was observed that when the teacher supports students in non-threatening environments that were reported as being warm and caring, students were highly self-motivated. Meaningful connections between subject matter and child, as related to personal goals, were identified as very important markers for future success. Wiggins (2001, pp. 3-4) shared that when the teacher is able to help students “make meaning out of musical experiences and to use music as a means of personal expression”, the student would feel empowered “to become musically proficient”. She went on to state that the role of the teacher is to make it possible for someone to learn and it “involves developing experiences designed to enable participants to develop particular understanding through their participation” (ibid.). To do so the teacher must begin thinking during her planning with the musical world of the children if they wish to positively influence the child’s musical development.

Campbell (2006, p. 433; cited in Lum and Whiteman, 2012, p. 3) stated that “Children learn the role of music within their society simply by living in their culture”. In her book, Methods for Teaching Music to Children, she also shared that, “children socialise through music” (Campbell, 2008, p. 127). Ms Yan demonstrated this belief when she introduced singing games and activities that required interaction among the students. She created a positive environment for her students to learn music where the tone of environment was inviting and non-threatening to her students. She wanted her lessons to be able to provide students the concept of musicality which she believed was essential for all children. She wanted all her students to have the opportunity to grow more musical as part of their lives. She shared that her music curriculum programme could help continue the natural development of her students’ capacity to listen, perform and create. The material selected for her lessons were age appropriate and engaging. They provided students with the necessary scaffolding required for the lesson objectives. The level of difficulty was not easy enough that the students felt unchallenged, resulting in off-task behavior. Neither was it too difficult that it hampered progress. Routine established in the classroom allowed the teacher to have better classroom management. For example, the teacher would use a series of rhythmic claps to get students’ attention. In response, students would ‘answer’ the claps with another series of ‘agreed’ rhythmic pattern. The ‘answer’ was discussed earlier in the year when the teacher was establishing rapport and routine with the class. She would play a short tune on the keyboard in the classroom as a cue for the students to assemble after group work. She also taught the class a song about ‘getting ready to return to class’. All these routines helped the teacher managed the class and set a conducive learning environment for the students.
CONCLUSION

The type of pedagogies that the teacher uses nurtures student identity. We have seen how the teacher started with building a class identity which was then further developed into smaller group identity, ensuring that the personal voice could still be heard. We have also seen how student-centric lessons can help develop the personal voice. For example, giving opportunities for students to make musical decisions empowers them and increases ownership of the work they do. Also through teachers’ feedback and students’ reflections, students’ understanding deepen and work is improved.

If identity is developed through the inculcation of life-skills, we saw that there were opportunities for these skills to be nurtured through the teacher’s pedagogies. The teacher was able to develop students’ soft skills such as working in teams and the value of turn taking and respect for each other’s contribution through her guidance and careful planning. She was also able to help develop leadership quality among her students as she provided opportunities for them. Students become self-directed learner while receiving advice and feedback from all around. Students adopted and adapted the qualities they see in their friends and role models, in this case, their teacher.

Finally, we also saw that the musical identity of students is developed through authentic tasks and lessons that integrate listening, creating and performing. Throughout the process of learning to compose a song, students became musically inspired. With examples and careful scaffolding, students were able to complete task with little difficulty. The empowerment given to decide and contribute motivated students to want to achieve higher attainment level. They become more confident learners.
REFERENCES


