

## Article

# Courage to Create: A New Music Education Degree in Instrumental and Vocal Teaching

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**Abstract:** As a special partnership that offers a unique way to strengthen the arts and cultural developments in Singapore, a new curriculum was offered to prepare students for instrumental and vocal teaching careers, with a focus on pedagogical instruction and educational theory. The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of music-student teachers engaged in this new programme within a conservatoire context. This paper outlines the framework of a new BEd (Honours) course in Instrumental and Vocal Teaching that addresses the current problem of conservatoire students being inadequately prepared for a profession in (studio) music teaching. Data were captured through focus group interviews with the first two cohorts of this programme in 2023. Three principal themes emerged from the thematic analysis, relating to how students valued contextualization, criticality and conversations within this new curriculum. The results highlight the impact of a specialist education that allows musicians to shape their profession in instrumental and vocal teaching, debunking the notion that conservatoire education is exclusive to talented performers.

**Keywords:** student teachers; higher music education; conservatoire; curriculum; in-between space; learning evaluation; instrumental teaching



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## 1. Introduction

On 9 March 2010, Singapore's Member of Parliament Ong Kian Min passionately debated in a Parliamentary meeting about the crucial need for specialized and trained teachers of music who could not only give valuable insights into this subject, but also inspire and enthuse students [1]. His emphasis on the significance of knowledgeable and passionate educators became a catalyst for re-evaluating the role of music education in shaping well-rounded individuals. As Singapore continues to move towards an age of increasing diversity, the arts have been foregrounded as a creative starter which can provide skill sets that other industries deem valuable and are applicable to other fields such as healthcare and technology [2,3].

In the quest to cultivate creativity and innovation in music education, curriculum approaches towards developing music teachers must be scrutinized to achieve a balance between disciplinary dimensions and relevance to society [4,5]. As highlighted in [5], the roles and responsibilities of trainee music teachers have evolved as they take on more expansive portfolios where collaborations and partnerships extend beyond the traditional boundaries of music. New competencies are expected as music teaching moves beyond a one-to-one apprenticeship model to include an expanded idea of contemporary apprenticeships [6], where individuals function within various types of collaborative work as consultants, co-ordinators, facilitators, directors, project managers or activists in community and social engagements [7].

While we seek to design a curriculum that is responsive to our present-day and evolving needs, we realize that the institutionalized curriculum in a neo-liberal context appears to have been mired by social pressures of receiving a so-called good degree [8]. In Singapore, assessment-centric approaches steered by UK-based examination boards such as ABRSM remain predominant in the education of music [9]. Hence, a paradigm shift is necessary, recognizing that the purpose of music education extends beyond achieving set benchmarks to fostering the overall development of individuals in their formation of professional identities [10]. With this background in mind, we begin this paper by describing the in-betweenness of student teachers, followed by a presentation of how the conservatoire-based educational system in Singapore has been innovatively expanded to include a new Bachelor of Education in Instrumental and Vocal Teaching as an alternative alongside traditional offerings of undergraduate music degrees. This addition aims to better prepare undergraduates to navigate the dynamic and diverse landscape of an ever-changing world. In order to validate the effectiveness of the curriculum, we conducted focus group discussions to compare the academy's official presentation of the curriculum with the views and feedback from the first two cohorts of students in this programme. The discussion makes an argument for how creativity in this curriculum is democratically fostered through notions of courage, which is a little researched and theorized concept in curriculum studies [11].

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. *The In-Betweenness of the Music-Student Teacher in Higher Education*

While there is increasing inclination to enter into a career of music teaching among students in conservatoire education, the provision of pedagogical training remains somewhat inconsistent and insufficiently focused. Previously, Mills [12] observed that there remains a significant gap in pedagogical training within the traditional conservatoire model that sufficiently prepares graduates to work as instrumental and vocal teachers in the twenty-first century. Yet, music students continue to be actively engaged in the teaching profession as a viable income stream [13]. In a study of students who were assigned roles to act as if they were professionals despite lacking the necessary experience or competencies, Rantatalo and Lindberg [14] explained that imposter syndrome manifested as a form of "mimicry". Caught in this state, individuals could also experience doubt, uncertainty, and ambiguity [15,16]. Furthermore, they risked being prohibited from the acquisition of "insider" knowledge as newcomers [17,18]. As students in the arts began to find new ground and push boundaries in this in-between space of learning, they have experienced a sense of powerlessness by engaging with "an unknowability of the other" ([19], p. 241).

Paradoxically, it is in this very space of being in-between learning and teaching that curiosity takes flight and imagination ignites. The in-between space is an empowering process for student professionals in music to increase the control that they as individuals have over the decisions and resources that affect their own lives [20]. Here, they are caught in a rite of passage that fosters a space for dialogue, reciprocity and self-expression [21]. Lehrer [22] further pointed out that intersections connecting the familiar with the unknown create opportunities for innovative practice [23]. In post-modern discourse, being mindful of in-betweenness is crucial for us, as educators, to facilitate entry into the students' interrogatory interstitial space, opening up exploratory possibilities that shift away from the rigid categories of student or teacher. As described by [24], the in-between is "a space of networks and conjunctions" (p. 10).

### 2.2. *Creating a New Undergraduate Music Education Curriculum*

The tensions that student teachers face in the space in-between underscores the need for a curriculum that extends beyond performance to include pedagogical techniques, engagement strategies and adaptability in various settings [11]. Furthermore, the roles of instrumental and vocal teachers have evolved to include advocacy, networking and community engagement, underscoring the need for curricula that foster such competencies [6,7].

Additionally, contemporary music education advocates for a student-centred approach, emphasising musical processes and exposure to a broader spectrum of genres [7,25]. Any conservatoire curriculum today would have to create new pathways for musicians to integrate the skills and knowledge that are relevant to the contemporary music industry and societal changes. Approaching curriculum re-design from this perspective would mean including aspects of creative and cultural entrepreneurship, intercultural collaboration and digital technology integration [6].

Addressing what Porton [26] has identified as “a longitudinal training failure” (p. 108) in the conservatoire curriculum, the BEd (Honours) degree in Instrumental and Vocal Teaching strategically fills a gap in music education in Singapore, catering to a niche between conservatory performance programmes and classroom music teaching. Since a large majority of music graduates accept teaching appointments in music schools and private studios, situating a music education degree within a conservatoire environment prepares student teachers for studio teaching roles, serving a wide range of learners engaged in individualized instrumental or vocal lessons, preparing for exams with external boards, and participating in school music co-curricular activities [27]. This curriculum is pivotal in supporting the evolving portfolio careers of contemporary musician educators, blending performance with educational expertise [28].

The conservatoire-based music education system in Singapore has expanded to include a new undergraduate degree in instrumental and vocal teaching, alongside the traditional Bachelor of Music (BMus) program. As a space in-between, the new Bachelor of Education (hereafter BEd) (Honours) in Instrumental and Vocal Teaching emphasises not only performance, but also repertoire studies, pedagogical practices and transferable skills that close the misalignment between traditional BMus programs and the career aspirations of present-day graduates. The curriculum is structured around three pillars: Performance Studies and Literature, the Principles of Instrumental Teaching and Leadership and Applied Skills, with the latter offering elective options for broader learning. As explained in the programme structure (Table 1), this curriculum is designed to cultivate creativity, reflexivity and adaptability to explore diverse teaching methods and approaches within instrumental or vocal teaching, and hone leadership skills for music educators [7].

**Table 1.** The BEd (Honours) course structure ‘at a glance’.

BEd Curriculum Pillars	Modules	Level	Credits <sup>1</sup>
Performance Studies and Literature	Principal Study (Pedagogy Track)	BEd-3	60
	Principal Study (Pedagogy Track)	BEd-4	60
Principles of Instrumental and Vocal Teaching	Conceptualizing Music Education	BEd-3	20
	Teaching Practicum	BEd-4	30
	International Placement	BEd-4	Non-credit core
Leadership and Applied Skills	Electives	BEd-3 & BEd-4	70
Overall Credits			240

<sup>1</sup> 240 credits must be completed overall for the award of BEd (Honours) in Instrumental and Vocal Teaching.

### 2.2.1. Performance Studies and Literature

Within the Performance Studies and Literature pillar, the Bachelor of Education curriculum refines its approach to enhance students’ technical and musical skills through

Principal Studies (Pedagogy Track). This module now extends beyond traditional one-to-one lessons and interpretative performance, integrating elements like lecture–recitals and a focus on relevant pedagogical issues [7]. This shift is in response to a broader pedagogical perspective, as suggested by [11,25,29]. In addition to individual instrumental lessons with their teachers, students benefit from mentor-led consultations, enriching their pedagogical, technical and analytical skills and leading to comprehensive lecture–recitals and viva voce, fostering reflexivity and deepening understanding [7,30–32]. This integrated approach, incorporating teaching seminars and the Teaching Repertoire Project, enhances students’ ability to engage actively in creating and discussing teaching materials, thereby enriching their educational journey and reflective practices [7,33,34].

### 2.2.2. Principles of Instrumental Teaching

The Principles of Instrumental Teaching pillar of the curriculum is pivotal in bridging the gap between traditional and contemporary music education needs. It comprises two core modules: Conceptualizing Music Education: Ideas and Practice, and Teaching Practicum. The first module immerses students in the philosophical, theoretical and sociocultural perspectives of music education, fostering critical awareness and reflection, an approach which resonates with the findings of [35], who emphasizes the importance of reflective practice in music teaching. Additionally, students observe experienced artist educators, covering individual and group lessons, lessons for special-needs learners and early childhood music. The module also discusses inclusion, assessment and technology.

The Teaching Practicum module is pivotal in bridging theoretical knowledge with practical application, offering students valuable hands-on experience in lesson planning and delivery, video analysis and portfolio development. This module is designed to cultivate critical thinking, adaptability and reflective practice, culminating in a comprehensive report that encapsulates the students’ learning journey. Such practical exposure is crucial for the holistic development of student teachers. Hallam and Bautista [29] highlight the essential role of practical engagement in developing musical expertise, while Hallam [36] underscores the benefits of experiential learning in instrumental teaching. Aglen [37] further advocates for real-world teaching scenarios within music and performing arts education, emphasizing the value of practicums. This comprehensive approach is vital for addressing the need for expansive pedagogical training in higher music education, echoing Kahu’s [11] emphasis on the necessity of a holistic view of student engagement for effective pedagogical strategies.

The Principles of Teaching pillar, enhanced by elements of glocalization, leverages [38]’s investigation into how intercultural music-making influences students’ identities and practices, alongside [39]’s insights into intercultural competence. This segment enables students to delve into the philosophical, theoretical and sociocultural aspects of music education before applying these insights within a Singapore-based teaching practicum. To further enhance this learning experience, the curriculum expands to an international context with a 7-week placement at the Royal College of Music (RCM) in London during their final year. This international exposure includes observing education practices at a partner college and receiving individual supervision, thus providing students with a comprehensive global perspective on music education.

### 2.2.3. Leadership and Applied Skills

The third pillar, Leadership and Applied Skills, offers a range of electives that enable student teachers to tailor their learning to their interests and career goals [4,40,41]. The electives cover a wide range of topics, including Performance Science and Psychology, Conducting, Creating Music and Sound Design for Theatre, Creative Enterprise and Innovation, Workshop Leadership and Musicians in the Digital Age (see Table 2).

**Table 2.** Electives in BEd (Honours) in Instrumental and Vocal Teaching.

Modules	Credits
Composition Level 5	20
Orchestration and Transcription Level 5	20
Conducting Level 5	20
Alexander Technique Level 5	10
Musicians in the Digital Age Level 5	10
Performance Science and Psychology Level 5	10
Schenkerian Analysis Level 6	20
Creating Music and Sound Design for Theatre Level 6	20
Orchestration and Arrangement level 6	20
Workshop Leadership Level 6	20
Ethnomusicology: A Global Perspective Level 6	20
Aesthetics and Criticism Level 6	20
Open Project Level 6 (Graduation)	30
Enterprise and Innovation Level 6	10

The importance of industry relevance in curriculum development is well advocated for in music courses [42–44]. In [45], the currency of the curriculum is also reflected in how the institution maintains close connections with the local industry, in order to facilitate employability upon graduation. In this undergraduate music education curriculum, connection with the industry is established from the start of the course. This includes a two-way exchange with artist educators from industry practice, who are invited to share their practices in the core modules, and consultations with senior artist educators for their teaching practicum and lecture–recitals. Since the student teachers were already actively involved in teaching assignments in public schools and private studios, learning observations and open conversations became part of the way in which they would gain insights into pedagogical instruction and applied educational theories.

With a diverse student population from various nationalities and cultural backgrounds, this curriculum effectively functions as a global classroom. The multicultural environment in Singapore fosters global awareness and integration, providing a unique platform for exchanging and refining best practices in both Western and Chinese instrumental teaching traditions [46–48]. The intersection of performing and teaching, spanning Western and Chinese music practices and aesthetics, offers student teachers vital exposure and learning opportunities, enriching their educational and cultural understanding [49,50]. With the increasing need for the contemporary student teacher to be a versatile individual, this beckons the question: how has this curriculum cultivated the creative development of students?

### 3. Methods

This paper examined the data gathered from the qualitative findings of two focus group interviews, targeting all 23 students from the BEd programme, which comprised the entire first and second cohorts. The chosen demographic aimed to amalgamate the fresh perspectives of 11 recent graduates with the reflective insights of 12 final-year students, intending to encapsulate a comprehensive array of experiences. Despite the email invitation being extended to all students in both cohorts in October 2023, the actual participation numbered 15, including 10 females and 5 males. While this turnout was less than expected, the diverse composition of participants, spanning both recent graduates and final-year students, facilitated the collection of a rich and varied dataset. This ensured a holistic view of the myriad experiences and perceptions harboured within the BEd programme, thereby achieving a balanced and nuanced understanding of the educational landscape under study. The participants, aged between 19 and 29, represented a broad range of faculties of study, including woodwind, string, keyboard players, vocalists, and Chinese instrumentalists, as shown in Table 3. This sample distribution closely mirrors the typical



proportion of each faculty within each cohort, ensuring a diverse and representative cross-section of the student body. The interviews were facilitated by the first author. Identifiers are removed to ensure the anonymity of the participants. The semi-structured interview included these questions:

1. What makes learning in the BEd course distinctive for you?
2. How did you benefit from the BEd programme?
3. How has your choice of the BEd degree changed/augmented your perception of music?
4. How are you applying your learning experiences to further studies or what you are currently doing?
5. If we consider a more personalized curriculum, what type of customization would you like to have access to and why? Are there any other suggestions in the curriculum?
6. Any final thoughts/comments?

**Table 3.** Demographic Profile of Students in Focus Group Interviews.

Name (Anon)	Year of Study	Faculty	Age	Gender
S1	Final Year	Piano	23	Male
S2	Final Year	Erhu	25	Female
S3	Final Year	Piano	27	Female
S4	Final Year	Piano	23	Male
S5	Final Year	Piano	21	Female
S6	Final Year	Piano	24	Female
S7	Final Year	Piano	21	Female
S8	Final Year	Piano	23	Male
S9	Final Year	Violin	21	Female
S10	Fresh Graduate	Piano	22	Female
S11	Fresh Graduate	Violin	23	Female
S12	Fresh Graduate	Woodwind	29	Male
S13	Fresh Graduate	Piano	21	Female
S14	Fresh Graduate	Piano	21	Male
S15	Fresh Graduate	Voice	24	Male

Through thematic analysis, the researchers were able to uncover the main themes that emerged from the focus group discussions. An inductive approach was employed in this study following the guidelines and procedures outlined in Braun and Clarke's framework [51]. The coding process involved three steps: first, in-depth reading of the transcripts to gain a general understanding of what the participants were expressing, with fully anonymised identifiers; second, coding the text by sentence as a unit of analysis; third, axial coding to identify overarching themes, allowing for a comprehensive analysis of the findings on the students' learning experiences of the curriculum. To ensure the reliability of the coding process, the data were read by all three researchers and independently coded. Differences were discussed to arrive at a consensus. This resulted in three main themes being identified and presented as rich descriptions.

In addition, the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, University of the Arts Singapore BEd curricula in collaboration with Royal College of Music London also proved useful to draw out key themes emerging from discussions in response to the research question for this study. This included reflections on the international placement by the pioneering cohort of students who graduated from this programme in 2023.

#### 4. Results

Three principal themes emerged from the data on how the first two cohorts of students experienced and perceived the curriculum: contextualisations, criticality, conversations. Contextualizations refer to the student teachers' ability to adapt their teaching strategies to diverse educational settings, celebrating diverse forms of musical expression that enabled them to enjoy a richness of different genres and styles that the curriculum brought to the cultural tapestry. Criticality refers to how the student teacher engages in self-reflection, to evaluate their own growth, learning and contributions within the musical community. Conversations detail the creative approaches by which student teachers interacted with their own students, parents, teachers and peers.

##### 4.1. Contextualisations

The student teachers reflected on how they were able to connect their musical teaching experiences to a wide variety of pedagogical methods available to both Western and Chinese instrumentalists. The student teachers clearly enjoyed diversity in the learning environment, as they were able to contextualise their own practices against the practices of other instrumentalists and vocalists:

"I think this program gives me opportunity to learn and understand different pedagogical ideas from different mentors and PS [Principal Study] teachers, particularly in the areas of playing and teaching. . . I feel I gained a lot of support from different mentors." (S6, BEd 4)

"the strength of the course is its focus in relating these concepts back to our practice, while also analysing their efficacy critically." (S15, Fresh Graduate)

"the sharing of pedagogical ideas across majors in Performance Class and teaching seminars" (S15, Fresh Graduate)

"we can learn from other instruments as well." (S5, BEd 4)

"the things I learned in this program prepares me and I can apply it on a lot of different teaching contexts." (S5, BEd 4)

Students reported that the program shaped their pedagogical approach to be more tailored to individual student needs, encouraging student centredness:

"they tell you not just one way, not just two, they can come up with three, four or even more than that. So I thought is more student centered. So they really think of how to help the student, they try to provide as many solutions as possible. Strategies for them." (S12, Fresh Graduate)

"I realize that there are a lot of tiny things that my kids will react to that I never even knew was like that bad, you know that they really, really cannot do it. So now I managed to look at a lot more materials." (S10, Fresh Graduate)

"I realized that when it comes to younger students, the most important thing is that as long as it gets across like the lesson that knowledge learn for today is delivered to them. That's what's most important." (S13, Fresh Graduate)

Such contextualisations were particularly manifested in the teaching practicum and repertoire project in the BEd curriculum, where student teachers received hands-on teaching experience to apply their learning in real-world scenarios:

"the observation for the group lesson and the individual lesson, it did help me to deepen my insight." (S3, BEd 4)

"Repertoire project seminars were also helpful to provide ideas on forming a well-conceived pedagogy and curriculum which cross pollinates with ideas covered in the other core modules." (S15, Fresh Graduate)

Contextualisations led to a deeper understanding of the cultural and social dynamics and a broadened outlook on the value of diverse pedagogical practices, which influenced

their creative approaches to teaching. The pairing of local practicum experiences in Singapore with a 7-week international placement in London enabled the student teachers to gain insight into a dynamic range of education contexts, and build these into their own practice:

“from the observations that we have had both in Singapore and London, I think being able to quickly adapt to changes [to meet individual students’ learning needs and at the level] where my students would be.” (S13, Fresh Graduate)

“this course has definitely supported me in my development as a teacher. Aside from the Pedagogical aspects, I look at the societal aspects, different age groups learning needs that will help me better plan my lessons and how people operate in groups and how people operate individually is very different. I get to see how people in Europe view learning music as people as opposed to people in Asia. These are different viewpoints that will allow me to plan my lessons better.” (S8, BEd 4)

“Since returning to Singapore [from international placement], I have tried to emulate these methods, speaking softly and being more encouraging. It’s not always easy, but it has had a positive impact. My goal now is to observe how these changes affect my students’ learning and improvement.” (S12, Fresh Graduate)

#### 4.2. Criticality

It was through the curriculum that students became more self-aware and sensitive to their own actions to improve their teaching practice:

“So somehow, I became more aware that there is there are such things going on, and then, I will try to relate them to my own teaching practice, like, Oh, am I doing? Am I using analogies? Or am I using a different strategies?” (S12, Fresh Graduate)

“the program completely changed my perception of how I should teach, how I should approach teaching.” (S1, BEd 4)

This “conscious raising” approach was reflected in the questions that they posed:

“this whole program made me question a lot of things like why do I teach these things? How do I teach these things? What do I need to teach and so on.”

“am I teaching for the sake of just teaching?” (S12, Fresh Graduate)

The student teachers reflected a deeper critical analysis of their present pedagogical knowledge, perspectives, actions and experiences, signalling a shift in their teaching approaches as they embraced diversity to advance their teaching and learning:

“I have a lot of resources to accommodate students and I can match their learning styles.” (S11, Fresh Graduate)

“it’s all about the experimentation that I gained the different approaches.” (S5, BEd 3)

“helped me in learning about different methods of teaching and how to approach when there are challenges. . .how to be able to solve it. . .” (S13, Fresh Graduate)

The students’ comments also suggested that the curriculum enabled them to acquire and evaluate information that they could sift and apply to real-world situations:

“the whole experience made me rethink how I teach my students . . . . . critically involved in understanding learning styles . . .hunger for more research-informed methods.” (S12, Fresh Graduate)

The curriculum provided an opportunity for students to critically evaluate their personal beliefs, values, assumptions and other factors that may have influenced their pedagogical approaches:



“there must be some reason why this certain student is behaving this way, why he or she cannot play this. . . I became very caring and patient . . . . . through observations you do not only observe, you analyze how they teach. . . what work or what did not work. . .” (S12, Fresh Graduate)

Beyond self-reflection, students demonstrated the need for a reciprocal form of sharing to provide support for improvement:

“we can always evaluate our teaching, how we can improve our teaching and how we receive feedback from our mentor.” (S7, BEd 3)

“feedback has helped me shape my teaching.” (S2, BEd 3)

#### 4.3. Conversations

The students reflected on the importance of open and two-way communication with pupils and their parents to improve music learning in studio instruction:

“the role of the teacher is . . . like a triang[ulated] relationship. we have to communicate. We have to know what the student is thinking and also the parents.” (S3, BEd 4)

“teaching is also about the relationship that you forge between you and your student and also you and the students’ parents.” (S5, BEd 4)

“I can communicate more with parents . . . I can explain what is good for the student, what needs to improve on what to practice. I also wrote down comments to offer to all the parents. I also look at the different perspectives. From a parent’s perspective, like sending the child to the music school, we also pay the fees.” (S11, Fresh Graduate)

Conversations enabled the students to not only build relationships with their pupils and parents, but also co-regulate practice, solve problems creatively through dialogue and consequently improve teaching and learning strategies:

“So it becomes more two way instead of one way, because I used to just give them instructions or sort of like, comment that okay, okay, you do this, you do that. And you practice this and practice that. But now I would discuss with them.” (S12, Fresh Graduate)

“when I teach, no matter young or adult, I will always treat them as a music communicator. . . we have to exchange our ideas and also [build] a relationship with the parents.” (S3, BEd 4)

“I find that I discuss a lot with my PS [Principal Study] teacher, how to play this portion? And then if let’s say the student encounter issues, how do I teach this issue? How do I give them strategies to work with and so on? So I thought, this was very, very, very useful, because these are the things that I need to use with my students.” (S12, Fresh Graduate)

Studio observations further enriched opportunities for conversations with others that contributed to making lessons more engaging and inclusive:

“[Lecturer] invited many external teachers that share the same principles and I think this has really changed my perception.” (S1, BEd 3)

“The different learning methods. . . also opened up a different perspective for me. . . there is not just one way of teaching, I have to cater to the needs of the the student. I also had to cater to the age group that they are.” (S4, BEd 3)

“when they were teaching the students, they knew what actions to do next. So it was it was very well organized, the structure was very, very amazing to me.” (S12, Fresh Graduate)

“I can try their methods I can imitate first into my teaching; and if it works, then I will definitely take this into my own style.” (S11, Fresh Graduate)

Students also highlighted opportunities that the curriculum afforded for collaborative learning through peer exchange. Sharing among peers involved active discussions and mutual learning that occurred both during and after their academic programme, reflecting a continued engagement with and contribution to the educational community:

“We have more opportunities to discuss with our peers about what we are playing and why we are playing a certain way ... There’s more opportunity to learn from each other. And then now I feel like after I leave NAFA, I still have the chance to talk to my colleagues about what I do not know in teaching.” (S10, Fresh Graduate)

“We are learning things together, we are taking each step together and learning new things together ... [here], like an instruction rather than doing things together.” (S13, Fresh Graduate)

## 5. Discussion

Change is often a daunting and unpopular task, requiring the classical music academy to step out of the norm and challenge the established conventions of a professional creative career as performers that are available to only an elite group of students upon graduation [52,53]. Our findings illustrate how broadening the students’ career horizons through a flexible curriculum that foregrounds instrumental and vocal teaching encouraged individuals to explore new possibilities that were previously unimagined. What all three themes in the findings have in common is the creativity that was exemplified through a courage to overcome challenges, embrace innovation and break stereotypes.

### 5.1. Courage to Overcome Challenges through Contextualizations

The findings revealed that the BEd (Honours) curriculum successfully addresses the challenges posed by student diversity in terms of instruments and cultural backgrounds. The design of the curriculum allowed for contextualisations to cater to the needs of both Chinese and Western instrumentalists. This enabled an inclusive discourse on creative pedagogical approaches within both core and elective modules, promoting an awareness of variations in teaching methods. Through the acquisition of knowledge on the principles of instrumental teaching, the student teachers gained exposure to diverse musical traditions, encouraging them to embrace a range of musical traditions. One notable example involved an erhu student teacher who conducted a comprehensive survey and analysis of the pedagogical methods across different traditions, including Western instruments. This analysis enabled the student to design unique teaching strategies and materials to enhance traditional Chinese instrumental practices. The documentation of pedagogical methods was particularly valuable to Chinese instrumentalists, responding to the dynamic and diverse nature of modern educational settings beyond the oral transmission of pedagogical practice [7,50,54,55].

The findings of the study also indicate that the student teachers recognized the significance of cultural and social relevance [4] and demonstrated their commitment to adapting their teaching to various contexts, cultural nuances and individual learner needs. The reflections of the pioneering cohort of participants after a 7-week placement at the RCM highlighted how cross-cultural pedagogical understanding was fostered through student exchanges with different principal study lecturers and international mentors. This exposure provided the student teachers with the opportunity to experience various teaching approaches and philosophies that could be explored in their own local practice.

### 5.2. Courage to Embrace Innovations through Criticality

Participants in this study highlighted an acute self-awareness about what is learned, why it is learned and what is to be achieved from this knowledge. From the findings,

we highlight the significance of developing criticality to appreciate different learning styles, enabling student teachers to tailor their teaching methods to suit the developmental needs of teenagers. One such instance involved a clarinet student teacher, who effectively broke down complex concepts into manageable parts for pupils in a secondary school. This included teaching collaborative skills in duet playing, communication during performances, rhythm consistency and creating different tones through improvisatory activities. This methodical breakdown helped make these advanced concepts more accessible to the pupils. This approach not only built confidence in music making, but also enabled this student teacher to move beyond technical skills to focus on developing ensemble musicianship, resulting in a more personalized musical experience.

The courage to embrace innovative practice within the curriculum aligns with the ethos of the Task Force on the Undergraduate Music Major (TFUMM), which is committed to “forge new vistas in music study that are appropriate to the present moment in musical practice and society” ([56], p. 2). Similar to TFUMM, this curriculum encourages students to generate innovative approaches in music education by cultivating pedagogical adaptability within these student teachers who would be working with young people of diverse backgrounds.

Another aspect of the curriculum that has helped us to pinpoint explicit innovative approaches is the student teachers’ lecture–recital. This culminating showcase, which takes place at the end of the final year, provides a platform for student teachers to demonstrate the practical application of pedagogical instruction through performance [33]. In one of the graduate lecture–recitals, the student teacher not only demonstrated extended flute techniques through a performance of repertoire, but also expanded on how such techniques could aid young pupils in developing their skills and understanding of the instrument.

Additionally, to accommodate the varying levels of teaching experience among student teachers, the curriculum is designed to foster a safe environment where novice and experienced teachers can engage in open conversations and facilitate mutual learning and mentorship. The curriculum includes a 14-week teaching practicum, where student teachers are encouraged to exercise their curiosity and become more proactive in communicating with their own pupils. During this practicum, student teachers are required to solicit input from their pupils as part of a documentation of their pedagogical proceedings. We argue that this process not only allows for reflection on their teaching practices but also leads to a shift in the teacher–student dynamics, where the student teachers experience duplicity as both teacher and student. This experience, in turn, fosters a more empathetic and inclusive learning experience for all.

According to [57], individuals who embrace the courage to teach hold a fundamental belief that “the more familiar we are with our inner terrain, the more surefooted our teaching—and living—becomes” (p. 6). Our analysis indicates that the student teachers confronted their own fears and insecurities through critical questioning, reviewing and evaluating personal biases and current practices. This observation extends what it means to encourage reflexivity at an individual level in learning, where the student teachers can be given the space for “critical self-reflection on one’s biases, theoretical predispositions, preferences” ([58], p. 224). This process allows them to muster the courage to come to know, however imperfectly, the deeper meaning of the development of new knowledge, as well as discover the creative possibilities that stem from that.

### 5.3. *Courage to Break Stereotypes through Conversations*

The student teachers’ experiences revealed that improved communication with pupils and parents improved inter-relationships that consequently supported the development of teaching strategies. Facilitating opportunities for conversations in the curriculum fostered the courage to break stereotypes, where the student teacher was empowered to co-regulate with their pupils to set clear practice goals [59].

These findings resonate with the views of Lennon and Reed [7], who highlighted the role of discussions in collaborative environments to enhance teaching methods. Further-

more, Myers [4] stressed the importance of dialogue as it not only deepens one's understanding of the subject matter, but also encourages shared learning and teaching improvement.

The results reflected on how students valued studio observations of master tutors interacting with other students, as these conversations enabled them to connect their own ideas to others. Other dialogic exchanges with assigned mentors, particularly in the Teaching Practicum and Principal Study helped to create a sense of 'structure' to teaching that would otherwise be guided by the student teachers' instinctive pedagogical acumen.

Facilitating interstitial moments where students could exchange ideas with one another in pocket conversations further facilitate mindfulness towards their own teaching processes [60]. As the students are recast from the position of consumers of expert knowledge to those of prosumers who discover or navigate to produce new knowledge, we shift the dynamics from institutionalised 'power over' to personal 'power to' [61,62]. With such conversations to co-build knowledge, we no longer have the 'banking' model of education [63]. Instead, we have one which emphasizes co-construction and agency [64].

## 6. Conclusions

Creativity requires courage [65]. In the artist's own words,

"... courage is essential to the artist, who has to look at everything as though he were seeing it for the first time: he has to look at life as he did when he was a child, and if he loses that faculty, he cannot express himself in an original, that is a personal way." (p. 218)

With fresh pairs of eyes, this study has shown how a new BEd (Honours) curriculum has empowered student teachers to overcome challenges, embrace innovation and break stereotypes. By contextualising music learning, engaging in critical discourse and fostering conversations, the conservatoire environment can be transformed to provide students with a wider range of career options. Recognizing the in-betweenness of the student teacher at the conservatoire and relating this to broader social and cultural contexts is a starting point. This study demonstrates a continued commitment and fearlessness to chart new trajectories for the contemporary conservatoire curricula in Singapore. By breaking free from the constraints of a traditional performance-oriented curriculum, and exploring the in-betweenness in curriculum frameworks, we create a space to test the valour of conventional pillars, and debunk the traditional notion that a conservatoire education is exclusive to talented performers alone.

In relation to the discussion, we point to three ways in which deeper curriculum studies would be helpful towards cultivating creativity and innovation. The first is an exploration into the concept of pedagogical adaptability. As we noted in this article, the creative practices of the clarinet student teacher suggest a compelling need to examine how different teaching methods are adapted to diverse learning styles, alternative learning environments and specific instruments or music genres. The second is to deepen the student teachers' focus on culturally responsive teaching methods in order to further learning engagement and the creative development of their students. Drawing from the positive student perceptions of the cross-fertilisations of Western and Chinese instrumental approaches, more effort can be devoted towards cross-cultural pedagogical practices. The third area to extend a student-centred curriculum into would be to research new skills and knowledge that would be relevant to the future of the creative industry. This could include deepening the integration of creative entrepreneurship, interdisciplinary collaborations and digital dexterities.

The current paper recognizes the importance of student voices as the curriculum evolves to prepare students for unknowing futures in today's arts and culture landscape. However, the data were drawn from one higher music education curriculum in Singapore. An area for future research would be to widen the sample through comparative research with other conservatoires that are similarly shifting away from the traditional focus on developing musical dexterities through one-to-one apprenticeship models. This would provide a more dynamic understanding of the impact that evolving conservatoire-based

curriculum models could have for the arts and creative industries. As the data were drawn from participants from the first two pioneering cohorts, an area for future research would, therefore, be to widen the representation of student teachers in terms of the diversity of their educational backgrounds, as well as the different types of instrumental and vocal study areas in this programme. A greater understanding of how the curriculum impacts the personal and professional growth of student teachers will further support the career trajectories and creative pedagogical approaches of student teachers. We therefore hope that longitudinal studies to assess the sustained impact of this curriculum on graduates' careers and contributions to the music education sector can better contribute to evolving conservatoire curricula within local, regional and global landscapes.

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