

One Year in the General Music Classroom: A Story of Survival

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Notes to reader:

Names of people mentioned here have been changed to protect individuals' privacy.

Content contains instances of strong language which some readers may find offensive.

Background and Research Process

Last summer I applied for this Action Research fellowship fully intending to formulate a question that would help me articulate – at least for myself, if not also for others in the profession – why I teach what I teach in the way that I teach it. Soon after, at least one mentor of mine correctly prodded me to become better at explaining ““what it is I’m trying to do”” so I could better support the student teacher I would host that year, and I felt more compelled to articulate my purpose in the general music classroom (Entry 16, December 8, 2016). The pedagogical foundation of my teaching, Education Through Music (“ETM”), is an approach toward music education that has seemed effective for me and many of my colleagues, but which is much less popular than other approaches (i.e., Kodaly, Orff, Gordon) and for which almost no quantitative or qualitative research exists. At the time, I wanted to take on the task of scientifically explaining – if not proving – what makes this approach so effective for children learning music. Needless to say, as I scratched away at finding a place to focus my research, I became my own research subject.

In my first journal entry required for this fellowship, I expressed fear about what this study would lead me to discover about myself. I knew even then that the process would be uncomfortable, and that yet the journey needed to begin. The first novel series that I have ever completed, *The Neapolitan Novels* by Elena Ferrante, left me uneasy last spring that one theme concluded in the main character accepting that one must simply become more comfortable with discomfort, so imagine my shock when the ARLI course text described this as a mindset necessary to and conducive for action research!

I also knew then that I wanted to choose an area of focus that would bring some measure of joy and confidence because I was well aware of the frustrations, disappointments, and

disruptive student behavior that could use fixing but knew that my energy would be better spent focusing on expanding successes. I decided to heed the recommendation from the course text of reflecting and writing about one thing per day for a week (Dana and Yendol-Hoppey, 2009, p. 40). The authors give detailed instructions for how to write the reflection, but I felt confident that I already knew how to write and excited that writing just one thing per day would be feasible for me. I wrote a lot but not every day and was enjoying this new way of reflecting and processing my teaching day.

By December and January, I had garnered quite a few reasons to focus in on a class of 7th and 8th grade students with low-incidence disabilities, particularly Autism Spectrum Disorder. I enjoyed teaching them and being with them, and felt intellectually challenged to find ways to advance their musicianship and understanding of musical concepts. I had professional connections both within and outside of the school to support research that could articulate the development of music literacy or individualized musical goals, but I couldn't stop seeing everything in my data collection and analysis!

By March, my journal was my richest source of data, and a brief re-read opened my eyes to how much intense emotion was conveyed in my writing as well as to my continual wish to focus on my own and my students' strengths. I was also well-aware by this point that the times when I pulled out my camera to take photos or videos were moments that felt thrilling for me – usually when students were demonstrating musicianship. Per the earlier suggestions from the ARLI cohort, I turned my focus to finding joy.

In April, on the verge of setting aside the entire project, I was prompted to consider the descriptions from my journal as a story of survival, and that is the course my research took. I noted that “I met with [my research advisor] to talk through ARLI. It was tough. I barely stayed

motivated to get myself there, and then when I did, I felt like I talked too much and in circles. I felt encouraged and supported, though, to continue with the project...[and she] suggested an approach to data analysis that might help me figure...out [the story]” (Entry 45, April 15, 2017). In the end, my research question evolved into examining what I need to survive as a teacher. I wanted to know: In a particularly challenging school year, what do I do to sustain myself as a teacher? What do I value as a professional? What do I want in a work environment? What are the feelings I have but don’t like, and how and where do they begin? How do I notice and create joy in teaching despite all this? I eventually realized these questions were not fresh in my mind when I happened upon a journal entry from December in which I wrote, “I went in[to the class that day] with a mentality of survival. ...How do I survive this job?” (Entry 21, December 17, 2016).

Data Collection & Analysis

My data consisted of my own teaching journal, photos and videos of students, a few field notes, email communication and in-person feedback from colleagues and university students, and academic papers by colleagues using me as an interview subject.

When I took to analyzing my journal in March and presented my cursory findings to the ARLI cohort, I saw that in only the first two months of data, I used more than double “negative emotion” words compared to “positive emotion” words in my journal. That number does not refer to frequency, rather to the breadth of vocabulary. My list of “negative emotion” terms – nearly half of which were in my very first journal entry – showed that I experienced feeling: fear, anger, guilt, sadness, apathy, confusion, skepticism, exhaustion, frustration, disappointment, ineffective, desperate, hopeless, bitter, disgusted, disturbed, speechless, verbally assaulted,

helpless, depleted, avoidant, raging, nervous, unprepared, torn, unsupported, regretful, irritated, annoyed, dreadful, retaliatory, and a desire to be comforted and understood.

Knowing that changing my negative feelings was not where I wanted to focus, I reviewed the entire journal to identify themes. I eventually came up with the following list of terms (Table 1) as themes from my journal that I sorted and categorized – with help from a more objective perspective – into: Feelings I have but don't like, Things I want for my students, Things I value, My biggest struggles, and Things I want for myself. As I sorted these terms, I was intrigued by the recurrence across categories. The wants and values categories overlapped a lot, and were also some of my biggest struggles. I saw also from this process that what I wanted and valued for myself aligned with what I wanted for my students.

Table 1: Journal Themes.

Leadership	Support	Social Justice
Community	Collaboration	Relationships
Trust	Communication	Learning/Growth
Idealism	Release	Strengths-based (approach)
Discovery	Creativity	Feedback
Optimism	Time	Reflection
Storytelling	Musicianship	Motivation
Choice	Singing	Identity
Productivity	Confidence	Success
Purpose	Planning/Preparation	Voice
Change	[Student] Behavior	Institutional Instability
Proving something/myself	Searching/Questioning	Pedagogy
Context (individual, whole group)	Instruction	Entanglement (personal/professional lives)

Finally, I regrouped the most pervasive of these themes in a way that simply made sense to me. To tell the story, I use scenarios and descriptions to illustrate my experiences. The experiences, however, are rarely isolated to just one category. For instance, in one entry I

identified a *highlight in my teaching day* that came out of *reflecting on an instructional dilemma* that I was *motivated to solve* based on how *students communicated with me* about their progress (Entry 35, March 6, 2017). The four headings I use to tell the story are:

- **Finding the Bright Spots and Building on Strengths:** Optimism and a Strengths-Based Approach
- **Relationship-Based Practice:** Communication, Relationships, Feeling Supported, Community, Trust, and Collaboration
- **When Professional Development is Personal:** Purpose, Productivity, Life-Long Learning, Growth, Discovery, Change, Reflection, and Entanglement
- **Professional Identity and Well-Being:** Confidence, Leadership, and Motivation

SCHOOL AND INSTRUCTIONAL CONTEXT: Otis Elementary

James Otis World Language Academy is a neighborhood public school in the West Town neighborhood of Chicago with spectacular views of the city's skyline from some of its classrooms. It is named for the world language magnet cluster program, however, only Spanish has been offered since 2011. The school serves nearly 500 students in Preschool through 8th grades. Most students live within the attendance boundaries, but some families have elected to attend Otis even though it is not their designated neighborhood school. Otis hosts a cluster program for students with special needs – particularly autism and visual impairments – which constitutes over ¼ of the student population. Most of these students are assigned to Otis and are bussed with their siblings from throughout the city.

The demographics and statistics from CPS as of October 2016 indicate that 90% of students at Otis are Low Income, yet single family homes in the neighborhood sell for well over

\$1 million. The school's enrollment drops most years, but families moving into newer real estate surrounding the school typically do not send their children to Otis. The same set of statistics show that the student body is 70% Hispanic, 25% Black, and 5% White/Asian/Other. Our students have a 9% mobility rate, and over a third of them receive support for learning English as a new language.

An important part of the recent history of Otis is that it became a "welcoming school" in the fall of 2013 following widespread school closings throughout the city. The former Peabody Elementary was absorbed into Otis, and the attendance boundaries shifted such that some families travel over a mile to reach their neighborhood school. This event also created an uptick in enrollment to roughly 650 students. I recall the merger as rushed and therefore tense. Within the building, construction projects and classroom reassignments were happening almost until the moment students arrived. Once in session, there was a sense of rivalry for school pride between students and sometimes even teachers. Three years later, there is still evidence in places like adult and student conversations or students' clothing that indicate elements of separateness and pride for a school that was closed despite hours of pleading and protesting.

Also worth noting is that the principal who saw the school through the transition transferred to another school within CPS the summer of 2015. This resulted in a shifting administration during the 2015-2016 school year and a general feeling of uncertainty and instability for both the students and faculty/staff at Otis. After an interim principal and then an administrator-in-charge with her newly hired assistant principal, the current principal accepted the contract in late February 2016 and remains the head of the school.

As the school's music teacher, I am one of few teachers who works with every child at Otis except for students in half-day preschool programs. My students range in age from 3 to 15. I

began teaching at Otis in a part-time position in fall of 2008, so the students who were my first class of kindergarteners at Otis are now in 8th grade. My teaching context has varied over the years and from class to class, but since 2012, I teach each homeroom class, including the designated cluster program classes, once a week for an hour. On days when students do not have music class, they rotate to art, gym, library, and Spanish class. Each of these classes has a designated instructional space. Decreased enrollment means that this year I also have five periods per week where I either provide academic interventions to individual students or supervise in the lunchroom on lunch duty. This particular year, I was often pulled to substitute teach another class for an hour at a time during those five periods.

My instructional approach is play-based and experiential. Most lessons incorporate song-games that are multimodal so that students are socializing and moving within the parameters of a song-game while they are learning and making music.

Teaching Context

October 11th was the first time I wrote about being upset and disgusted by students' behavior, but I didn't know to include details, and I didn't know those behaviors would persist over the course of the year. Following are some examples from throughout the course of the year.

On September 21st, I jotted an anecdotal to myself that a student stated "I'm gonna throw this bitch at you" where "bitch" was a reference to the heavy acoustic piano in my classroom. A few moments later, she responded, "I don't give no fuck," when on the white board she replaced "suck dick" with an equivalent image and then was told to erase it.

On October 19th, an 8th grader who transferred in a week or two earlier used – as I’d seen from middle schoolers before – the solfa hand signs (i.e., do, re, mi and so on) I teach for learning melodic notation to represent masturbation. He took it to a new level and pretended to ejaculate. The next day, “one of the darkest[-skinned] girls in our school, said for us all to hear, almost proudly, “If Trump gets elected, I’mma bleach my skin or something!” A few days later, I stopped in the midst of teaching Kindergartners and wrote about the “anger pulsing through my veins” because I couldn’t bring their frenetic, chaotic bodies into order or calm. (Entries 5, 6, & 8, 2016)

At the end of November, I wrote about a few things I remembered hearing from students following the election. A 2nd grader retelling the warning his mother had given him to not open the door for anybody and the sixth graders asking when they would be sent back to Mexico. Middle schoolers cynically proclaimed at the start of Humanities class something to the effect that they couldn’t believe Trump would eventually be pictured in those very textbooks. (Entry 13, November 29, 2016)

In mid-December, I was left “subbing” for a large class of 7th and 8th graders that I dreaded because of numerous contextual factors. I described what was essentially an improvised 2-hour music lesson and was stunned by the chaos of bodies – adults and students in and out through the course of the lesson. Five adults besides me were in and out, presumably with the intent of supporting me, but some were more disruptive than supportive. (Entry 21, December 17, 2016)

In February, a 5th grade boy came to me nearly with tears in his eyes to say, “[She] just said I look like Donald Trump because of my hair” (Entry 32, February 27, 2017).

In March, I noted how apathetic I was about a few clever 7th graders going into the recess closet inside the entrance to my classroom and taking out a soccer ball. Their playing with it shattered a fluorescent lightbulb and light cover just before the Kindergarten class entered. My apathy was protective if not justified because I later learned that at that very moment, there were police in the building restraining a student. And in my school of just over 30 teachers, 7 were absent that day. (Entry 42, March 23, 2017)

On the first day back from spring break in April, I entered unusually early to prepare for my first day with my student teacher to find our school's only dedicated daytime custodian crying next door to me from feeling mistreated by other adults in the building. I stayed with her instead of doing the work I had in mind. (Entry 46, April 17, 2017)

A week later I wrote that I gave a stern but calm question to prompt a middle school student who I am assigned to tutor once a week to get his work, and "he shot up from his desk, probably was saying some nasty words that I can't even hear anymore, shoved 4 or 5 chairs around the room, and slammed the door so hard behind him as he entered the hall that it bounced back open. He then proceeded going up and down the stairs, and hiding, at least once in the elevator hallway. His classmate had also left class without permission, and they seemed to make some plan." I worried they would leave the building, but thankfully they eventually came to the main office, where I had decided to wait. (Entry 48, April 24, 2017)

The next day I learned the ambulance visit I'd seen the day before was to transport a student who had over-dosed in the school bathroom on her brother's prescription medications. I learned after this that counselors had made at least nine referrals by that point in the school year for students with suicidal thoughts or attempts. (Entry 49, April 25, 2017).

On May 8th I documented and shared with administrators some of the observations my student teacher made when she accompanied me as an observer to tutor the aforementioned student. (Email correspondence, May 8, 2017). His actions included the following:

- "I'm gonna stay at this motherfucker and they'll have to move me every motherfuckin' day, and I'm gonna keep comin' back."
- The security guard informed the student before leaving the room that his mother would be contacted, to which he responded, "I'm gonna call your motherfuckin' mom."
- Displayed cash to teachers and students.
- Reached around the homeroom teacher to slap another female student, and then engaged in a physical struggle with the teacher when he wouldn't release a stack of her papers.

In June, during what was supposed to be a drum circle, two boys seated on one side repeatedly stuck up their middle fingers to two girls seated on the other side of me and received the same response every time: "shove it up your ass." Later those same two boys were freestyle rapping with lyrics such as "my pussy yearning, my pussy burning..." and then, "I get A's, B's, C's, and D's, fuck that bitch there on her knees... he smell like a G-D." When asked the next day, they wouldn't commit to labeling that gang as either "friend" or "foe". (Entry 52, June 7, 2017).

FINDING THE BRIGHT SPOTS AND BUILDING ON STRENGTHS: Optimism and a Strengths-Based Approach

"...My intent from the very beginning of this project was to focus on the parts of my teaching that made me feel good. I wanted to expend energy challenging myself to expand the

parts of my teaching that were working rather than fixate on trying to change the parts of my teaching that made me feel desperate, hopeless, or incompetent” (Entry 34, March 4, 2017). The idea of a strengths-based approach to teaching is one that I have adopted naturally. A common phrase in the Education Through Music courses is, “Teach as though they will,” and indeed that perspective guides how I determine whole group and individual goals for my students. I learned through my interview with one music education researcher whose interest is linking music therapy with music education for children with exceptionalities, one term for this is an ability perspective (McClintock, 2017).

I explored the concept of strengths-based approach more formally during grad school while studying and working with young children and families, particularly when therapeutic interventions were needed. The conceptual framework set forth by García Coll et al, (1996) was seminal in prompting practitioners to consider the developmental competencies – rather than deficits – of minority children. Their ideas have expanded to inform many realms of child development and also serve as a way for most anyone to organize a way of thinking about one’s own identity. In any case, the idea with a strengths-based approach is that a practitioner pinpoints what is already working and recreates that success more often, or uses it to resolve problems or concerns.

Perhaps for the first time, this year I became willing to look beyond finding only my students’ strengths to finding my own strengths. What are the parts of my job that I truly enjoy? What can and do I do to increase the frequency or duration of those events? What gets in the way of me noticing those moments each day? And how do I recognize those bright spots despite the many distractions and negative emotions I experience each day? Upon closer examination, the

joyful moments are often fleeting or thought-provoking, and so they can be concealed by the disappointments of the day.

I learned that I felt successful at maintaining optimism when students were singing, when students were compassionate toward others, and when I felt like something I did was contributing to the good of the school, especially if others offered feedback. I valued times when students were creative, communicating and on-task, when colleagues and administrators were transparent or vulnerable with me, and when the events of my day were within a range of predictability. I was more deliberate than ever about using strengths-based questioning with students by asking what was successful or familiar, and then considering challenges or uncharted territory.

One time I felt particularly successful at focusing on strengths was with a 4th grade class at the early stages of preparing for a concert. I felt excited and delighted that students readily engaged with the choral score I had just presented to them. They were curious without being overwhelmed, and I effectively facilitated a discussion that helped them interpret and navigate the score. This happened, however, with an awareness about what brings me joy. “I had to intentionally block out the counterproductive feelings in order to be an objective observer of the situation and continue prompting and promoting musical and intellectual endeavors” (Entry 37, March 13, 2017). During this lesson as well as others that felt successful, students share their own ideas and build off of others’. Observing these discussions allows me to be responsive to what I hear, or sometimes connect an activity or concept in music class to students’ other interests.

I learned that remaining optimistic and focused on strengths is challenging when the lingering negative emotions from scenarios like those described above get in the way of putting

my best self in front of my students and others. Sometimes my stress response simply overshadowed whatever positives there were in a day. Teaching is emotional work.

RELATIONSHIP-BASED PRACTICE: Communication, Relationships, Feeling Supported, Community, Trust, and Collaboration

During graduate school I came across several frameworks for relationship-based practice. As with the strengths-based approach I described, the idea is that this mindset informs how one is when conducting therapies or interventions with families or children. Again, the approach resonated with me. In a nutshell, relationship-based practice is careful and empathic listening, questioning to promote reflection, observing and fostering relationships, and understanding professional use of self such that changes – improvements – come about through the relationship (Gilkerson & Cochran Kopel, 2005). Of the many roles a teacher plays, one I feel consistently good at is relating to others and drawing out their ideas, so it is only logical that this approach transferred into my work as a teacher.

Through the few photos and videos I was collecting I began seeing my own delight from hearing and seeing students collaborate. The best part was been that the classes who were trusting communities sounded better when they sang together. This phenomenon was an upward spiral because those groups came to love the sound of their own singing and worked harder to support the group effort. I was often reminded of what I am told is an African proverb: “I am because we are,” but moments like those made me think the inverse must also be true: “We are because I am.”

One example from the year of when relationships made all the difference was coordinating a field trip for 100 middle school students to the Chicago Cultural Center and then Symphony Center to hear a concert from the CSO. I wrote afterward,

Holy smokes! Field trip day!!! I'm so wiped out! It wasn't as amazing as last year, but it was at least good enough. It felt like there was so much drama, drama, drama!... Maybe the problem is I still try too hard to keep everybody happy. My colleagues, especially I'm so thankful for Danielle and June!!! I loved that I could trust them...and the kids saved the day, like they always do. (Entry 27, February 9, 2017)

I was upset, however, by one of the first responses I received walking in the building and wrote in the same entry, "like why the fuck can't she acknowledge the positive impact a trip like this has on our school community?!" Despite all of the positives and the incredible collaborative efforts from so many people, that interaction and how I perceived my relationship with that person in that moment nearly jeopardized my perception of the entire event.

Inviting university students into my classroom for the first time this year led me to recognize how the isolation most teachers experience as part of the job affects my mood. In addition to hosting student observers, I was fortunate to serve as a cooperating teacher and felt an immediate difference in myself. "I just finished my first week with Cora, and it flew by! ... I should be writing still 'one thing per day' but alas. This week, though, I did notice a difference in my mood just from having another adult with whom to share the experiences of the day. Wow!" (Entry 47, April 23, 2017). Because I had someone else with whom to share the emotional experiences of the day, those last entries served as my sounding board for writing detailed reflections on what I wanted Cora to learn or experience and sketching ideas for ways I could promote that.

Relationships had incredible sway over my emotional experiences as a teacher. Almost every journal entry had some account of feeling support or the lack thereof. These accounts usually concerned other adults, but I also wrote about times when I felt I had failed others, at least by my standards. Relationships were a slippery slope to letting negativity overshadow optimism.

WHEN PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IS PERSONAL: Purpose, Productivity, Life-long Learning, Growth, Discovery, Change, Reflection, and Entanglement

On a Thursday in December, I got home and felt frozen not only because of the cold weather, but also from facing a lengthy to-do list of tasks needing to be done. Like most Thursdays, I left school feeling “in an okay mood” because I enjoy my last class of the day and went straight to therapy (Entry 20, December 15, 2016). That particular week, though, I felt worse leaving therapy than when I entered because communication was unusually strained. With that nagging list in my mind but feeling completely exhausted, I decided to decompress by writing about my day. That entry ended, “It’s a strange day when reflecting on my teaching day makes me feel better again. That just happened....” That day students were curious and actively engaged in making music, and relationships between students and between me and the students – particularly in 7th grade – felt safe, supported, and authentic.

A few months later, a friend and colleague, Casey Schmidt involved me in a pilot study on reflective practice for music teachers. Intuitively, of course, I am aware that reflective practice is professional development, but Casey’s interview questions and the way in which he synthesized my responses into an existing body of work on teacher reflective practice was eye-opening for me (Schmidt, 2017). I became more aware of how often a conundrum of mine reached a resolution by writing about it. I still have not stopped wishing that regular peer

reflective seminars were more accessible to more teachers to help us grow throughout our careers.

I have always sought out Professional Development, but the past few years, becoming more committed to working for The Richards Institute, ETM's parent organization, meant there was a limit on how much else I had time and interest in pursuing. This year, even when I represented ETM at two conferences, I felt an openness toward broadening my professional learning and social networks; my thinking was strangely free from a sort of pressure to either apply new information to ETM, or insist that ETM had a better technique, philosophy, or solution. Of course, there are still beneficial connections as I integrate ETM with new learning, but I feel more in control of how my thinking adjusts the familiar to accommodate what is new. In part because of the reflections and discoveries prompted by my participation in this fellowship, I relinquished my obligations and responsibilities with The Richards Institute.

Purpose, discovery, life-long learning, entanglement and more are some of the themes that led me to consider that *professional development is personal*, and are all evident in how I reflected on a three-day workshop at Northwestern University in early spring.

I'm glad I wrote about the composition workshop, and I can see composing becoming something more prominent in my instruction. ...[T]he QuerKlang project seems like the most comprehensive and systematic approach for experimenting with sound in the classroom, and I just had a hair-brained idea that maybe that workshop could be the root of a [travel] grant proposal. And then I remembered my ongoing interest in teacher reflective practice and wondered if there's not some travel to be had in looking how different places nurture in-service teachers. (Entry 45, April 15, 2017)

To have a surge of creativity and purpose when I had become accustomed to feeling emotionally drained each day was rejuvenating.

Separating personal from professional was challenging. For instance, numerous times my journal illustrates how stress from school created (or magnified) stress at home or around personal matters, or, vice versa. I also carried positive feelings between home and school. Mid-March I wrote, “I cooked dinner, which I’ve barely been doing, and I’m reminded how good it feels. It’s cheaper, healthier, good reflective time, both productive and relaxing, and good social connection time with [my husband]. ...I’m more aware of the things I’m doing differently now compared to a year ago that feel good” (Entry 38, March 14, 2017). Listing some of those changes let me see – at least for the moment – that I was capable of changing some environmental factors in my life in hopes of feeling happier. Some of those changes I mentioned enjoying were: reading fiction for pleasure, teaching in a classroom with better energy and functionality and with more natural light, home organizing projects that had me “feeling more in control of my life”, meeting weekly with a psychotherapist, co-teaching a small after-school guitar ensemble, and working out weekly with a trainer because it made me feel stronger mentally and physically, was a break from making decisions, and the physical and psychological effects lingered a day or two. Thus, personal growth and professional growth seemed to overlap.

PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY AND WELL-BEING: Confidence, Leadership, and Motivation

Having tossed around the idea all year, in early May I decided definitively to be proactive about not returning to Otis, rather than simply hoping things would either improve or something new would fall into my lap. Just over a week earlier, I wrote,

...[I]t's been an emotionally tough weekend. Yesterday I simply tried staying in motion despite feeling pretty blue, and today at brunch with Thea and Matt and Andre, I fought back tears more than once while talking about my career. My mind is constantly working through which changes I could make and how.... [T]his feeling of spring searching with little action is so familiar. I think I'd hoped that deleting ETM would lessen that, but I suppose really all it's done is eliminated one option that's opened space for many other options. (Entry 47, April 23, 2017)

With some help, I made a plan to begin job searching more aggressively.

My motivation and confidence waned throughout much of the school year, but especially while I was job searching. Fear of the unknown was all but paralyzing, and allowing myself to be vulnerable rather than apathetic or defensive took a conscious effort. Palmer (1998) points out that teachers "make ourselves, as well as our subjects, vulnerable to indifference, judgment, ridicule. To reduce our vulnerability, we disconnect from our students, from subjects, and even from ourselves...to minimize the danger" (p. 17). Just as I had hesitated at the start of this fellowship not knowing what I might discover, doing anything but the mundane and repetitive parts of job searching felt daunting. Small daily interactions kept me going, as well as rereading phrases I had written much earlier such as, "...working with ARLI might be exactly what I need to regain my confidence in my teacher identity and to feel like I have something to stand for and say for myself..." (Entry 1, October 4, 2016).

Confidence, like optimism, was a theme I categorized as something I want for myself. I recognize it in good leaders and from observing others and working on it myself, I see there is a fine line that separates it from arrogance. Having journaled about how various times confidence

– or the lack thereof – affected me professionally, the word popped off the page of the section of a research paper which described my teaching: “she gave off a confidence and delight in her work...[and] was intimately aware of each students’ abilities and built on those to support their learning” (McClintock, A., 2017, p. 6). These words also served as a reminder that how others view me and my work is not always how I view myself, and that like so many great teachers, I am my own worst critic.

My own idealism was a theme I identified as a struggle. I imagined how things could be, but sometimes that wishful thinking felt like it had no starting point and was detrimental to taking action. Reality can be disappointing for an idealist. Perhaps because of this idealism, I sometimes imagined myself in a position of leadership. This project made me more attuned to my attributes as a leader and to noticing what I value in others, what I need the most work on, and what holds me back. I reflected by describing something I admired in a leader, or by writing an ideal revision of an interaction and reminding myself, “Oh, that when I’m in similar shoes I’ll remember all these ways I want to be a better leader” (Entry 27, February 9, 2017).

Csikszentmihalyi (1993) writes, “The point is not to be browbeaten into the belief that you are powerless. It is in the interest of those who control our energy to make it seem that the status quo is natural, right, and impossible to change. It is in our interest to figure out that this is not always true” (p. 105). I was aware that my frame of mind was a significant roadblock to judging whether pursuit of more traditional leadership positions could be viable options for me, so I practiced developing my leadership skills whenever I could. At the end of a day spent coordinating school-wide concerts I wrote, “I was struck today by how good I feel today. I’m exhausted, but I feel hopeful. Days like today feel like I’m leading from behind, like I’m impacting our school and students for the better, and like I have more creativity. ...I also felt

supported by my colleagues. Everyone was asking how they could help, and I tried to have answers” (Entry 19, December 13, 2016).

CONCLUSIONS: Finding My Voice with My Students at the Center

In October and throughout the year, on the sidelines of my research project, I wondered about how to design learning environments and activities that would promote student voice. That wondering led me to attempt composing with students more than ever before, motivated me to follow students’ leads on selecting repertoire, and made me more agreeable to featuring a student soloist at the spring concert playing and singing a pop song she had taught herself.

In considering what I teach, how I teach it, and why I teach that way, I realized I want to amplify students’ voices. For now, though, it seems that in order for me to do that, I must first have my own. One reason I was getting cold feet in April was because I felt this story would not have a happy ending. Wanting to be a better teacher for my students ended up forcing me to more closely observe myself. I think I have always known that I value things like relationships, positivity, curiosity, and so on, and now I am more aware of both how those look in every day interactions and what role I play in making them sources of joy for me, and therefore my students. As Palmer (1998) puts it, “We can speak to the teacher within our students only when we are on speaking terms with the teacher within ourselves” (p. 31).

About a year ago I began working with a professional organizer in my home. (That choice had everything to do with doing something special for my husband and nothing to do with the popular book about minimalist living which I still cannot read). As it turns out, that work of recognizing in a tangible and visible way what brings value and purpose to my life and how to create and organize physical space gave me a jump start on identifying the ideas, activities, and

relationships which I value most. I view where and how I spend my time differently because of our work together and consider through a new lens what I keep in my life and what I release, whether tangible or not.

This story happens to come in a package tied up in a pretty bow, but it almost was not that way. One outcome of this project was a decision to leave my current school but remain, if possible, a general music teacher, and I am fortunate to have accepted a position at another Chicago Public School beginning Fall 2017. With all of the institutional instability at my former school, I made a point of finding closure with as many students and colleagues as I could. As I plan for this fresh start, I am more excited than ever because I am finally articulating what I want for both myself and my students, why I want it, and how to get it.

In contrast to the scenarios from the beginning of this presentation, I have hundreds of photos and videos representing the moments that got me through the year despite all the trials. In these many instances, the students and I reflect back to one another a sense of discovery, creativity, confidence, optimism, productivity, and support. We trusted one another to collaborate, change, learn, sing, and make music together. We took turns leading, speaking, choosing, and growing.

CONCLUSIONS: Action Steps

As an individual, I want to:

- Pay attention to find out if the things that I need to survive are the same things that will help me thrive.
- Continue putting energy into aspects of the job I want and/or value, including semi-formal reflective practice through writing and conversations; participating in a variety

- of professional conferences; building relationships with students, colleagues, and other stakeholders; contributing to the broader field when possible or invited; develop my own musical skill and knowledge; and determine personal interests and hobbies.
- Possibly establish regular, more formal peer reflective practice with a small group, either from within my school, within my discipline, or from across the district.
 - Continually reassess my own biggest struggles and most prominent values, and the presence of those in my teaching context so that I can advocate for what I need or make changes to my teaching practice.
 - Learn more about reflective practice for in-service teachers and about second-hand trauma, or other relevant frameworks.
 - Continue reading books and articles that address the emotional experiences of teaching.

I want systems at district, state, and national levels to:

- Find ways to emotionally support teachers that are meaningful and low-stakes, such that teacher participation is optional and entirely separate from teacher evaluations.
- Examine ways in which teacher mental health correlates to student learning and identify the most powerful antidotes to minimizing any negative effects.
- Promote strengths-based pedagogy and instruction, rather than prescribe curricula.

Limitations & Considerations

Among the barriers influencing this study and its outcomes are the fact that this research did not involve implementation of an intervention, thus the outcomes are not oriented around results nor inquiry toward specific changes over time. As with all action research, there is a lack

of objectivity in this study. I am aware that my comments and observations are based only on what I know and have experienced to the time of this writing. The fluidity of this project also means that perhaps my perspective would have been altered by including more data sources, or by selecting the research question earlier in the school year. Time is a limiting factor not only in terms of how data was collected, analyzed and synthesized, but also to the extent that the low morale I experienced during the data collection period was pervasive, affecting many people with whom I worked and likely how I interpreted my experiences. While I have tried to minimize my own bias in this story, I hope the story will be read with an understanding that what appears on these pages is my perception of this bit of my journey; with time, that perception may change.

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Monica graduated from Lawrence University with a Bachelor of Music in music education. She earned a Master of Science degree in Child Development with an infancy specialization from Erikson Institute in 2015. Monica's experiences teaching adults have included co-coaching CFE study groups, presenting at CFE teacher workshops and trainings, presenting at a district-wide CPS arts educators' conference, presenting workshops for Illinois Music Educators Association (ILMEA) and Illinois Association for the Education of Young Children (ILEAYC), and co-teaching Education Through Music courses, workshops, and observation lessons nationwide. Monica currently resides in Chicago with her husband – who is also a CPS teacher – and their corgi, Winston.