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Narrative Texture: The Layering of Voices in a Secondary Classroom for Learners with Special Needs

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Abstract

In this paper I explore the layers of voices represented in a classroom of high school students with special needs. As their guest music teacher, I learned about their strengths and challenges, their teachers, and their engagement with music. Issues of inclusion, access, privacy, and personal bias confronted me as I worked to construct narratives that honored the students' story of school. To address, in particular, the issue of bias, I explored representations of the data (Blair, 2010) in various formats (Lather & Smithies, 1997; Smith, 2009) and considered the influence of formatting to engage/disengage the reader (Barone, 1900, 1995). Here, I first share a narrative written from the learners' perspective followed by a narrative layered with my voice as the teacher-researcher. The metaphor of *musical texture* frames this paper and serves to enable the reader a glimpse into the students' musical ideas within their compositions as well as the multi-layered roles and perspectives within this special classroom.

Narrative Texture:
The Layering of Voices in a Secondary Classroom for Learners with Special Needs

It is a cold and snowy January day. In a room adjacent to a large secondary school media center, ten students wearing headphones are working at laptops—some alone while others work with partners. The carpeted room is rather cozy—three walls are covered with shelves laden with books, in the center are long worktables that seat students for collaborative work. A large laptop cart is outside the room’s glass doors; Mr. Johns, the media specialist, has ensured that the laptops were charged and ready for our use. Mrs. Blair, guest music teacher, moves around the room to answer tech questions or listen to students’ musical compositions.

In this study, I reconsider the experiences and tensions of teaching and learning among secondary students with special needs. I engaged in this study as a teacher-researcher, returning weekly to the high school where I had previously taught to serve as a guest music teacher. Together we explored music in many ways—through listening, movement, improvising, and composing. The students in the music class described above were working with the music software, Super Duper Music Looper¹ (SDML). Vignettes drawn from the students’ musical experiences using SDML are shared in this paper.

The students in this classroom have special needs that prevent their full inclusion in the school’s musical activities of choir and band (Challis, 2009; Florian, 2007; Jellison, 2006). Their teacher, Mrs. Miller², and I were mutually frustrated but not surprised by the lack of music education and quietly took it upon us to rectify the situation. Upon her invitation to provide weekly musical experiences for her students, I joined Mrs. Miller’s classroom as “the Friday Music Teacher.”³

The members of her self-contained classroom were teenagers learning at grade K-1-2 levels. Some students could not write their names consistently, some saw patterns and relationships in numbers but most did not. The classroom curriculum included pre-reading and pre-math as well as social skills for successful interaction in and outside of school. Shown below is Justin’s New Year’s resolution written as his morning journal (Figure 1). It demonstrates his limited ability to represent ideas with written language or illustration, yet reveals he understood he did not fully fit into the high school scene.

¹ Super Duper Music Looper is a looped based music software program which can be used to create musical compositions by selecting combinations of pre-loaded music loops.

² Mrs. Miller is a pseudonym, as are the student names.

³ In Blair (2008a, 2008b), I explored the student’s musical voices as represented in their musical compositions.

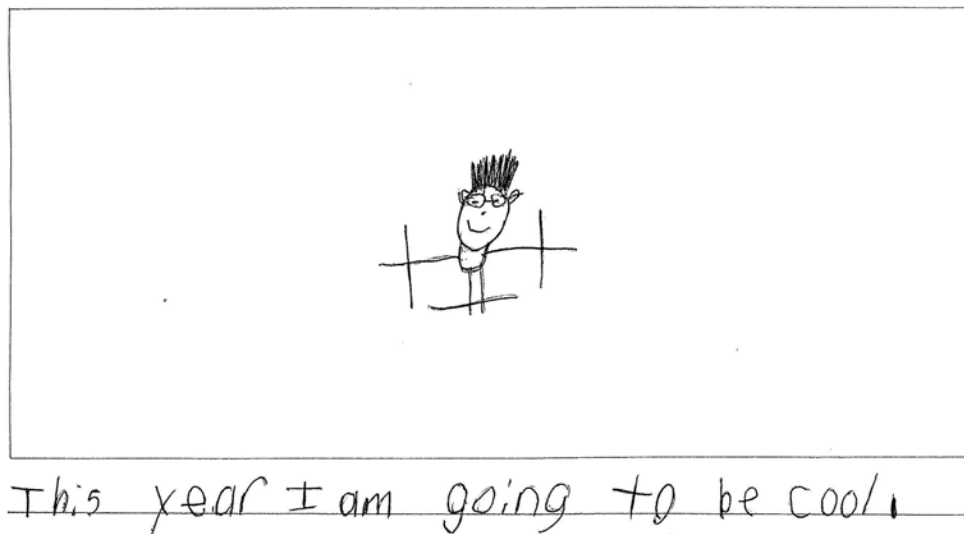


Figure 1. Justin's New Year's resolution.

In addition to cognitive impairments, these students had a wide range of challenges in unique combinations. Cathy was legally blind. She needed to sit near the board and required high contrast for reading. She spoke freely but dropped most consonants, requiring sensitive listening when in conversation with her. Her best friend, Kelly, suffered from depression; her unpredictable clinginess or aloofness required patience from those around her. Justin was mildly autistic and less verbal, though uncannily good with numbers. Danny had fetal alcohol syndrome. Ronnie, an easy-going boy with a slight build, was challenged by cognitive limitations associated with Fragile X syndrome. The students struggled in social situations and most had low frustration tolerance and anger management issues. Danny and Justin benefitted from highly structured schedules and routines—any variance could trigger a meltdown or physical outburst. Processing delays were a common characteristic; this additional limitation played out negatively in performance-based music settings, as the ability to function simultaneously with others was almost impossible.

The students in this special classroom would not be considered the darlings of a school community—it took large amounts of patience and emotional energy to understand, support, and teach them. Too many had been abused; a few were in foster care, most with the additional risk labeled as low socio-economic status. The stress of these risk factors in the students' lives had culminated in a lifetime of low- or non-success in school activities and in peer or teacher relationships. Yet Mrs. Miller⁴ provided a warm and safe family environment in which these students, in their own ways, were now able to thrive.

⁴ See Blair (2009) for a narrative of Mrs. Miller's voice and role in this classroom setting.

Tensions Along the Way

Throughout the study, as a teacher and teacher-researcher (Kinchloe, 2003), I struggled with ethical tensions (Josselson, 2007) in this educational setting—the apparent lack of access to music education, lack of resources in the classroom, lack of access to technology, and the taken-as-shared (Cobb, 2005) way that teachers, including myself, would have to find back-door solutions to problems that seemed to unnecessarily thwart instruction.

As a researcher interested in narrative inquiry, I later found considerable tension (Blair, 2010) in my attempts honor the students as participants as I sought to responsibly represent voice in the narrative text (Banks & Banks, 1998; Barrett & Stauffer, 2009, 2012; Bresler, 2008; Clandinin, 2007; Riessman, 2008; Withering & Noddings, 1991). I was particularly concerned because the special needs of these students prevented overt verbal expression. Although they and their guardians were informed of my goals and gave their consent, they did not fully understand that I would eventually share their stories (Lewis & Porter, 2007). I sought to allow the students' voices to be central to the text and I strove to put forward a faithful narrative of their lived experience, yet I found my own voice and bias seeping into the data until it took over (Barone, 2000a; see also Smith, 2009, on authorial surplus).

There were, I assumed, significant shortcomings in this learning environment that should be addressed; yet these teachers and staff members were former colleagues who had welcomed my return to this learning community. I had not confronted them with these issues and thus had not offered anyone an opportunity to consider my concerns, respond, or attempt to improve the situation. In my writing, I sought to raise Barone (2007) inspired questions that would “enrich an ongoing conversation” (p. 466), but my current narrative voice was “only a [noisy] gong and a clanging cymbal.”⁵ I set the matter aside.

Yet it would not let me go. With the high need of the students, the forged emotional connections with students and their teacher, and my personal sense of agency—I found it nearly impossible to balance “falling in love” and “slipping into cool observation” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, pp. 81-83). I aimed unsuccessfully for narrative construction as found in the work of Barone (2000b, 2001). I examined ways to balance voice in the framing of the written text, particularly considering its visual representation on the page and how that may engage or hinder the reader (Barone, 2000c). I considered dual formats such as Gottlieb and Graham's (1993) “Parallel Worlds,” Lather and Smithies' (1997) “Troubling the Angels,” and Tanaka's (1997) “Pico College.” I created a test website with a page for each voice embedded with links to enable the reader to navigate between pages/voices. My peers and I found it to be an annoying way to read a text and it remained merely an unconventional approach.

⁵ Phrase borrowed from I Corinthians 13:1 (NIV). *If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or clanging cymbal.*

In Clandinin and Connelly (2000), I was reminded of the inherent role of the researcher whose voice is in the study regardless of the ways one may try to make it invisible or neutral. I was encouraged to embrace all the voices in this study and now purposefully chose a narrative model with voices embedded throughout as seen, for example, in the exemplars of Belenky et al. (1986/1997), Clandinin, et al. (2006), and Ladson-Billings (1994).

Time affords perspective. Repeated forays through the data for analysis and interpretation, multiple drafts enabling understanding through “writing as inquiry” (Richardson, 2000), and support from colleagues⁶ have brought me to this particular representation as I have attempted to balance my voice with the students’ voices in Mrs. Miller’s classroom, to delineate yet give presence to the variegated textures of voices found here.

I now invite the reader to first enter the classroom with the students’ stories “through-composed” without the interruption of my voice as teacher-researcher.

In the Classroom

Danny has arrived with his classmates to a room just outside the media center where they will use the school’s mobile laptop lab. He settles down in front of a computer and is anxious to get started. The students are using *Super Duper Music Looper* and he is eager to see what it is all about. His classmates get right to work, each finding the card with his/her login code. Mrs. Miller, their teacher, runs good naturedly back to the classroom to get the basket of headphones and splitters for the students to use.

The students are logging into the school network and Mrs. Blair, the music teacher, quickly moves around the room to make sure students log in correctly. Danny calls for help, but she is helping others get logged in. Danny calls for help again. After what seems like an eternity to Danny, Mrs. Blair hurries over. She has a florescent orange card with Danny’s name and school login on it. “Do you want to login by yourself or do you need help?” she asks him. “I can do it,” Danny asserts.

Soon Danny is working with *Super Duper Music Looper* for the first time. As Mrs. Blair takes over the controls of the laptop to show him a variety of functions, he gently—almost subconsciously—nudges her hand aside to regain sole control. He easily maneuvers around the sound bank and finds loops that he likes and can put together to create his own musical composition. Danny finds immediate success locating loops that work together.

⁶ Feedback from colleagues Margaret MacIntyre Latta, Jeananne Nichols, Marg Schmidt, Phyllis Wolfe White, and Jackie Wiggins is greatly appreciated.

Within a few minutes, Danny urges Mrs. Blair over to see his new song. “This is *my* song!” he exclaims with a lilt in his voice, and in a dynamic range loud enough for all to hear. “I’m going to save it and make a cd of it and *everything!* *Can I? Can I make a cd of it?*” “Of course,” Mrs. Blair assures him and they listen to what he has so far. He is thrilled.

Ronnie and Justin, who share a silly sense of humor, are intrigued by the special effects loops. Justin particularly likes the burp sound; they laugh hysterically and listen to it over and over, but in the end Ronnie cuts it from their song. Ronnie calls Mrs. Blair over to see their song and both giggle through the listening. Ronnie explains their choices to Mrs. Blair and when their song is done, has decided to delete the last loop (a ray gun sound), stating matter of factly that they “need something else than that.”



Audio #1 (Justin_Ronnie) - <http://ijea.org/v14n12/audio/Audio1.mp3>

Seated together in the back of the room, Cathy and Kelly work together on their song. They are best friends and in spite of Kelly’s limited vision, Kelly controls the laptop, her nose almost touching the screen as she looks at their project. Cathy is more tech savvy but allows her friend to work the controls, talking her through each step with the calming tone of a long-distance tech support person. As they listen to each of the hundreds of loops, they respond with laughter or disgust to each new sound. It is the second day of their search for the perfect loops. They finally find something cool. “Now that’s what we were looking for!” Cathy states as she and Kelly find a loop to add to their composition. They invite Miss Barb to listen. She responds with dance-like moves as she bodily demonstrates her approval of their musical choices.



Audio #2 (Cathy_Kelly) - <http://ijea.org/v14n12/audio/Audio2.mp3>

Forty minutes later, class ends and Mrs. Blair is moving around the room to assist students as they save their work and log off correctly. “Wait for me!” she calls out cheerily. Danny sees the exit button, clicks it, and turns off the laptop. Mrs. Blair notices that Danny has logged off and says a silent prayer, hoping that he has logged off correctly. Danny assures her that he has done so. As soon as the class leaves the media center to return to their classroom, Mrs. Blair turns the laptop on and checks Danny’s work. It is gone. She did not get to him in time and he incorrectly logged off.

The next week, the students are once again in the room near the media center, using the mobile laptop lab to extend in-progress compositions or create new works. The other students have donned their headphones while Mrs. Blair tries to help Danny understand why his work

from last week cannot be found. He is heartsick. Mrs. Miller notices and comes over to talk to Danny. He cannot be consoled. Mrs. Blair sets up his computer so that he can begin to work on another composition, but he is unwilling. She moves around to assist other students while Mrs. Miller, whom Danny fully trusts, works to prevent a meltdown that seems to already be in progress. She returns with Danny to the classroom.

Two weeks have passed. Danny is working at Mrs. Blair's personal laptop during "leisure time," the designated free time that follows lunch. Danny has definite ideas about the loops he is previewing and describes some as "stupid" or "too funeral." Like his peers that swarm the hallways of his high school, he has firm ideas about what is cool in music. Danny finds something more suitable and says to himself, "hmmm. I kinda like this one." Mrs. Blair comes over to see what he is working on. "I like it," he exclaims, "I like the *sound* of it!"



Audio #3 (Danny) - <http://ijea.org/v14n12/audio/Audio3.mp3>

Sharing day has arrived and the students have returned to the media lab, now seated in a different section that has been darkened and resembles a makeshift movie theatre. Chairs have been removed from computer stations and are arranged in a semi-circle around a school projector facing a screen. Mr. Johns has done his best to create ambience for our anticipated viewing of the students' "music videos"—their songs projected on the screen with groovy Media Player skins synced to their rhythms. Students from other classrooms wander in to use the otherwise available workstations, but Mr. Johns shoos them away—this is their time. The students listen to each other's compositions with respectful exuberance, dancing in their seats and erupting into cheers as each song ends.

Dueling Voices

Here the student narrative is repeated, with my voice as *teacher-researcher* layered within the vignettes of the students' story of school.

Danny has arrived with his classmates to a room just outside the media center where they will use the school's mobile laptop lab. He settles down in front of a computer and is anxious to get started. The students are using *Super Duper Music Looper* and he is eager to see what it is all about.

Hidden within this innocuous introduction are layers of ethical concern that plagued me in this setting—in addition to the gaping lack of access to music education was the lack of access to classroom technology. The students did not have classroom computers so they have traveled to another room, regardless that they do not handle transitions well and walking through the building to another classroom may trigger

negative behaviors. Sometimes students with special needs do not function with the same sense of time (much like trying to hurry a toddler), thus working within strict class hours can be a problem when a student is making progress and is required to stop before he is ready simply because a bell rang.

These problems could have been easily solved. There were no computers in this special classroom although the students' Individual Education Plans (IEP) included the use of computers in their curriculum. This would have provided more time to build technology skills and would have eliminated the triggers caused by stressful transitions or the oft-unsettling requirement to stop. Most troubling was that the students could only use computers when other students were not using them. They were last on the list for access.

His classmates get right to work, each finding the card with his/her login code. Mrs. Miller, their teacher, runs good-naturedly back to the classroom to get the basket of headphones and splitters for the students to use.

Mrs. Miller, a master teacher in special education, is admittedly ADD. Despite her invitation and enthusiasm for me to "do music with her kids," the organization needed to include music became an additional layer of stress for her that I took upon myself to resolve. In this case, I provided the basket of headphones and splitters so that these items would be readily available to students (the classroom headphones were always missing, tangled, or broken). I also took on the responsibility of reserving the laptop lab. Although I was not on staff, the media specialist provided me with online access. Making the reservation was something Mrs. Miller would forget to do or would need repeated assistance to complete. Mr. Johns and I also worked together to increase the students' server space as the media files they were creating were too large for typical student space allotments; this too, meant extra work for him including several reminders to Mrs. Miller for her students' passwords.

This kind of "working through the back door" is common for all teachers, particularly specialists. As a former K-12 teacher in the arts, I took for granted the need to find ways to get around the lack of resources required to effectively do my job. I had regularly maneuvered my way around internal and external obstacles in order to better serve my students.

This is a lingering grand narrative of education—that teachers expect to get what they need through the back door because it is not available otherwise. Not illegally, we just

do things ourselves, write grants for necessities, pay for supplies or services, or learn to navigate technologies for our use. It is an unquestioned teacher way of being.

The students are logging into the school network and Mrs. Blair, the music teacher, quickly moves around the room to make sure students log in correctly.

We have had multiple problems with students logging in incorrectly, resulting in lost files. The alpha-numeric login codes present an obstacle that is not a barrier for other students. However, it has become a key source of frustration for these students because it took multiple attempts to accomplish a successful login. With a strong sense of agency to get going on their music projects, the students would, in frustration, log in as “guest.” This was problematic because work completed as “guest” was wiped off the server at the end of each day. In an attempt to rectify this, Mrs. Miller created laminated cards with each student’s login written in a large font. However, when students were not successful on their first attempt, they assumed “it didn’t work” (rather than assuming they entered it incorrectly) and would try another student’s card. The following week they would not be able to locate their composition because they could not remember whose card they used to log in.

When the district emailed all of the students that they would receive a new login code at the new semester, we again lost work and access. Because these students do not read comfortably, they did not check their school email nor would they have been able to create or remember the new login. Were these students on anyone’s radar to determine how new procedures might enhance or interrupt their curriculum and classroom routines? Why had the district (or media specialist) not realized the need for an alternative login system for these students?

Danny calls for help, but Mrs. Blair is helping others get logged in. Danny calls for help again.

I was almost frantically moving around the room helping students log in correctly. Removing technology glitches that become behavior triggers is an important part of the invisible scaffolding I could provide to allow students more time and energy for authentic musical interaction. I felt compelled to make sure all logins were secure.

After what seems like an eternity to Danny, Mrs. Blair hurries over. She has a florescent orange card with Danny's name and school login on it. "Do you want to login by yourself or do you need help?" she asks him. "I can do it," Danny asserts.

Like all students, Danny has a strong sense of agency about doing things for himself. Danny is 15 years old and well over 6 feet tall—a large young man with tremendous strength and very low tolerance for frustration. Mrs. Miller once used the word "explosive" to describe him; he can go very quickly from "teddy bear" to aggressive teenager. In this instance, he logs in successfully, but it is more by luck than skill.

Mrs. Miller became a peer-mentor as I learned to understand the dynamics of her classroom. I learned not to "do things for her kids" even when one's actions are well intentioned to "save time" or to "be helpful." As someone who values choice and learner autonomy, I had not considered that these students had rarely been given these opportunities. As teenagers they valued these freedoms yet with limited understanding of consequences, struggled to make good choices.

Soon Danny is working with *Super Duper Music Looper* for the first time.

Danny's peers have been creating music compositions for the previous three classes. However this is Danny's first experience with SDML and with music class as he has only recently begun to attend school in the afternoons. His ability to cope with the demands of school and with extended periods of social interaction is limited and his previous teachers had recommended half-day school for him. It is understandable that teachers may be afraid of Danny. He can become aggressive when upset and his school record includes information about an assault on a former teacher. Mrs. Miller, his teacher this year, insisted that "half days aren't good for anyone." She was determined to have his IEP changed to full days of school. She told me, with tears welling up, how on his first full day of school, he looked her in the eye and affectionately stroked her arm, quietly thanking her for "giving him a chance."

As Mrs. Blair takes over the controls of the laptop to show him a variety of functions, he gently—almost subconsciously—nudges her hand aside to regain sole control. He easily maneuvers around the sound bank and finds loops that he likes and can put together to create his own musical composition. Danny finds immediate success locating loops that work together.

“Immediate success” is one of the reasons I have selected this software for these students, as they rarely experience success in school and almost never immediately. The instant gratification, the intuitive nature and ease of use with SDML’s iconic representation, and its close connection to their own musical sound world, made it an appropriate pedagogical tool for these students.

Within a few minutes, Danny urges Mrs. Blair over to see his new song. “This is *my* song!” he exclaims with a lilt in his voice, in a dynamic range loud enough for all to hear. “I’m going to save it and make a cd of it and *everything!* Can I? Can I make a cd of it?” “Of course,” Mrs. Blair assures him and they listen to what he has so far. He is thrilled.

I, too, am thrilled. Danny has been successful and highly engaged. I have promised Danny a cd of his composition, but I knew that the school did not have a cd burner and I was nervous about the lost files. My back door problem solving was to tediously make handwritten notes in order to reconstruct the students’ songs at home.

Ronnie and Justin, who share a silly sense of humor, are intrigued by the special effects loops. Justin particularly likes the burp sound; they laugh hysterically and listen to it over and over, but in the end Ronnie cuts it from their song. Ronnie calls Mrs. Blair over to see their song and both giggle through the listening. Ronnie explains their choices and when their song is done, has decided to delete the last loop (a ray gun sound), stating matter of factly that we “need something else than that.”

Ronnie and Justin have childlike amusement with the special effects loops and seem to wait for my reaction to their humorous choices. They readily accept each other’s ideas—when Ronnie deletes Justin’s ray gun loop, Justin agrees with no complaint. They seem to intuitively understand each other and share a sense of what is funny but also of what sounds good musically.

Seated together in the back of the room, Cathy and Kelly work together on their song. They are best friends and in spite of Kelly’s limited vision, Kelly controls the laptop, her nose almost touching the screen as she looks at their project. Cathy is more tech savvy but supports her friend as she works the controls, talking her through each step with the calming tone of a long-distance tech support person.

The shared understanding between these two girls is almost palpable. They are seventeen years old and have attended school together, in the same self-contained classrooms, for several years.

As they listen to each of the hundreds of loops, they respond in unanimous laughter or disgust to each new sound. It is the second day of their search for the perfect loop.

Cathy and Kelly are quite opinionated about what constitutes good music and thus search nearly every loop for just the right ones; they will not choose something that is a questionable fit. Avid fans of country music, perhaps the techno pop loops in this software are less connected to their musical preferences and thus the extensive search. They have taken musical assessment for their composition to their own high level of scrutiny.

They finally find something cool. “Now that’s what we were looking for!” Cathy states as she and Kelly find the perfect loop to add to their composition. They invite Miss Barb, the classroom paraprofessional, to listen. She responds with dance-like moves as she bodily demonstrates her approval of their musical choices.

Forty minutes later, class ends and Mrs. Blair is moving around the room to assist students as they save their work and log off correctly. “Wait for me!” she calls out cheerily. Danny sees the exit button, clicks it, and turns off the laptop. Mrs. Blair notices that Danny has logged off and says a silent prayer, hoping that he has logged off correctly. Danny assures her that he has done so. As soon as the class leaves the media center to return to their classroom, Mrs. Blair turns the laptop on and checks Danny’s work. It is gone. She did not get to him in time and he incorrectly logged off.

My heart sank. In spite of the students’ best intentions and that they assured me they “know what to do,” they made errors. Thus the cheery “wait for me!” so that I could watch them complete the multiple functions required to log off. Week after week of lost work is frustrating for everyone and heartbreaking for the students.

The tech issues that circumvent these students’ success increasingly aggravated me. The students could not work with any sense of continuity that may have enabled them to develop their ideas from week to week.

The next week, the students are once again in the room near the media center, using the mobile laptop lab to extend in-progress compositions or create new works. The other students have donned their headphones while Mrs. Blair tries to help Danny understand why his work from last week cannot be found. He is heartsick. Mrs. Miller notices and comes over to talk to Danny. He cannot be consoled. Mrs. Blair sets up his computer so that he can begin to work on another composition, but he is unwilling. She moves around to assist other students while

Mrs. Miller, whom Danny fully trusts, works to prevent a meltdown that seems to already be in progress. She returns with Danny to the classroom.

Mrs. Miller did not want the other students to witness his emotional breakdown. Meltdowns, particularly public meltdowns, are both debilitating and demoralizing for teenagers. They are self-aware enough to know that these episodes are not “normal” and having a meltdown or witnessing a peer’s meltdown adds to the perception of “difference” or “other.” Mrs. Miller worked to remove the barriers and obstacles that trigger episodes or outbursts and did her best to protect the student’s dignity should such an episode occur. In other settings, punishment had been the typical school response to these events.

Two weeks have passed. Danny is working at Mrs. Blair’s personal laptop during “leisure time,” the designated free time that follows lunch.

I have resorted to allowing the students to use my personal laptop. It is not connected to the school server and thus has no login protocols. I can save the students’ work directly to the hard drive and back up files on a flash drive. By working in the students’ own classroom, there are no time restraints for entering or leaving the media center. However, this alternative limits students to working one at a time.

I silently thanked my qualitative predecessors (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) for naming me the research instrument and thus have made appropriate onsite changes. As the music teacher, I again worked the system to make the best of an inadequate situation. I brought my family’s old laptop into the classroom so that I could eliminate logins, save work indefinitely, remain in our family-friendly classroom and ignore the clock. The students were required to take turns, but no one seemed to mind. When I explained that with our new system we would not lose any more work, they looked at me with an expression that hinted, “well, why didn’t we do that in the first place?”

Danny has definite ideas about the loops he is previewing and describes some as “stupid” or “too funeral.” Like his peers that swarm the hallways of his high school, he has firm ideas about what is cool in music. Danny finds something more suitable and says to himself, “hmmm. I kinda like this one.” Mrs. Blair comes over to see what he is working on. “I like it,” he exclaims, “I like the *sound* of it!”

I smile to myself every time I watch the video clip for this vignette, originally collected as data in this very special classroom. Danny has found the musician in himself. He knows that what he has created is cool. “It sounds good.”

Sharing day has arrived and the students have returned to the media lab, now seated in a different section that has been darkened and resembles a makeshift movie theatre. Chairs have been removed from computer stations and are arranged in a semi-circle around a school projector facing a screen. Mr. Johns has done his best to create ambience for our anticipated viewing of the students’ “music videos”—their songs projected on the screen with groovy Media Player skins synced to their rhythms. Students from other classrooms wander in to use the otherwise available workstations, but Mr. Johns shoos them away—this is their time. The students listen to each other’s compositions with respectful exuberance, dancing in their seats and erupting into cheers as each song ends.

Questioning My Questions

It wasn’t right. These students did not have access to music education that would meet their strengths and challenges. Music programs of choir and band that served the greater school body were not an appropriate option for them. These students did not have seamless access to technology—in the core curriculum or in arts education. There were no computers in their classroom and they were required to use left over time in other computer labs. Security protocols created unnecessary barriers to computer access and, as a result, limited their curricular activities that may have required sustained use of technology. Lost work—repeated lost work—eventually resulted in a student’s debilitating breakdown. A lack of school resources and staff expertise required that I use my own resources as well as maneuver behind the scenes to accomplish what should have been routine preparations. When would someone assess seemingly simple policies for the ways they may affect their learners with special needs?

My noisy questions were not furthering the conversation (Barone, 2001). Like Justin and Ronnie’s composition, my roster of accusations were like their layers of special effects—more noise than musical sound that served to fill time and space but with no meaningful expression. Like Ronnie removing the annoying ray gun sound, I “need[ed] something else than that.”

Time afforded the needed perspective. I resonated with Bresler’s (2009) notion that detachment and connection are complementary, each bearing a role in enabling heightened perception. Bresler coaxed me to question my questions, to reexamine my initial assumptions including my attachment to these assumptions. In spite of the inherent presence of my own bias, it was incumbent upon me, as researcher, to find a level of detachment that would complement the connections forged in this setting. Could I look at these scenes and listen to

these voices in a way that would allow me to see something anew?⁷ Higgins (2007), too, challenged my unproductive connoisseur lens (Eisner, 1998),

Artists teach us how to see more, how to notice what most people miss. And like the best artists, the best researchers use their imagination to move past the cardboard versions of things. The question for educational evaluation is not which method to choose or how to employ it, but how to notice the aspects of schools hidden by our stereotypes of schools, the qualities of teachers and learners obscured by our cynicism or sentimentalism, the dimensions of classrooms that are hiding in plain view. (p. 393)

For example, Cathy would tell me about her clarinet, how she played the clarinet in band in middle school. I spoke to Mrs. Miller about finding a way to include Cathy in the high school band, to find her a band buddy, to have private lessons right in the classroom. Mrs. Miller gently helped me understand the essence of Cathy's previous struggles in band settings, the large group interaction that overwhelmed her, the processing delays that led to a downward spiral of frustration and low self-esteem that exacerbated her clinical depression. Mrs. Miller—and Cathy—had larger issues to confront than my need for Cathy to join band. Cathy had never talked about joining the band, she had shared her previous experiences in band. I needed to think about Cathy's own goals, not what I thought should be her goal. Mrs. Miller understood learner self-determination in the way that Dee (2007) suggests, with "the aim of education as enabling children and young adults with learning difficulties to grow into adults who can make choices about their own lives without dictating what a good life might be" (p. 403).

I was anxious to remove triggers that would fuel negative behaviors or to add accommodations beyond what may have been appropriate. Mrs. Miller understood that in a few months some of these students would graduate and we could no longer protect them. Learning to live successfully with others was the essence of their curriculum. Like Cathy and Kelly's composition, a more carefully composed balance was needed.

I had questioned the lack of concern—even awareness—by administrators that these students were under served in arts education. Yet, when I asked the principal and explained my goals, even to engage in research, I was welcomed with open arms. I assumed it was because of my former role as music teacher in that building. That may have made my entry easier, but because I had known these individuals to be caring educators, an alternate assumption could easily have been made—that my willingness to serve a difficult student group with music was something they thought would benefit these students. This was far from the villainous neglect I had projected upon them.

⁷ Graduate class discussion at Oakland University, July 28, 2010.

I had questioned the district's computer protocols that seemed to regularly undermine our musical engagement. Why were such difficult logins necessary? Why was the classroom not fitted with computers and supported by appropriate software? My initial assumption was that some anonymous "they" did not care enough to make the changes. I came to understand that Mr. Johns simply did not know that one could change the protocols, and most likely, did not know how. In the construction of this narrative, I gained new appreciation for Mr. Johns as he went out of his way to provide what little support he could to fulfill the technology requests of someone who was not a district employee. I remembered his excitement for these students to have this musical opportunity and that he genuinely enjoyed listening to their compositions. He made sure laptops were charged, allowed me access to reserve the media lab, and after our first dilemma to save files, worked to increase server size. How could I have taken for granted the way Mr. Johns rearranged the media center for our sharing day, shooing away students whose presence might interrupt our special event? Though I appreciated it at the time, I had neglected to value his efforts as something he did, not to help me, but to make a difference in these students' lives.

**I May Not Be Able to Change the World,
But I Can Change the Corner That I Am In Right Now**

Through the writing of this study, I was reminded of an incident when I had a guest teacher in my own elementary music classroom. Ms. Carlisle was introducing a local string program, something with which I had no expertise. She was appalled at the learning environment in my at-risk building. For her, the class sizes were "so large" that they overcrowded the classrooms, the students were unkempt and rambunctious. She asked, "How do parents let their students come to a school like this?" I was fully aware of the limitations in this building and enjoyed the spirited learners in my classroom. It was my favorite teaching assignment. Taken aback, I had answered, "we do the best we can with what we have every day."

I was now the guest in Mrs. Miller's classroom—a classroom with limitations but with teachers who did the best they could, day in and day out, with what they had. Mrs. Miller helped me see the other side of the students' school experience. As the guest teacher and university researcher, I enlarged my view to see the other side of the teachers' school experience. Mrs. Miller embodied what van Manen (1991, 2002) refers to as pedagogical thoughtfulness; she continually considered the experience of the child in every situation and demonstrated a pedagogy of care (Noddings, 1984/2003). She may not have remembered the headphones or known how to reserve the media lab, but she knew her students. She understood their goals, their frustrations, and she worked tirelessly to enable their success. Not her success, not my success, *their* success. Our experiences together enabled learner agency and personal expression in a musical way that had not been previously available to her students. Like Danny's composition, which for him was intensely satisfying, a multitude of

layers in wild juxtaposition now came together. It was not part of their curriculum to become musicians, as I would have liked to suggest. Danny was learning how to get through the day without physically assaulting anyone or having an emotional meltdown. Justin just wanted to be cool.

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