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## Co-constructing an intercultural professional learning community in music education

Lessons from a Nepali and Finnish collaboration

**Vilma Timonen**

Affiliation: Sibelius Academy, University of the Arts Helsinki, Finland

Contact corresponding author: [vilma.timonen@uniarts.fi](mailto:vilma.timonen@uniarts.fi)

### Abstract

This participatory action research aims to contribute to a better understanding of the advantages and complications involved in intercultural educational development work in the field of music education. The inquiry focuses on Finnish and Nepali music educators' collaborative activities in the period 2013–2016 aimed at establishing a music teacher education program in Nepal. The collaboration is examined through the theoretical concept of a professional learning community (PLC). Particular interest is placed on illustrating the nature of the professional learning that took place for the participating teachers during the development of the intercultural PLC. The findings point towards recognizing the importance of supporting systematic collaborative operational models within and between institutions, as they hold the potential for constructing reflective, ethically engaged, and diversity-aware music education – the kind of education that is needed in these rapidly changing times.

**Keywords:** *participatory action research, professional learning community, intercultural music teacher education, professional learning, music education*

### Introduction

In this study, I will address the need for music teacher educators' engagement for ongoing learning in our rapidly changing times and the exploration of means to expand music teacher educators' professional development into new territories: understanding of cultural

diversity, enhancing communication skills, and expanding understanding of the intrinsic values of one's own educational system. As several music education research studies point out (e.g. Bröske, 2020; Kallio & Westerlund, 2020; Sæther, 2010; Westerlund, Partti & Karlsen, 2015), being placed in an unfamiliar environment intensifies learning about one-self and one's professional boundaries. Working in a new context demands critical thinking and new kinds of problem-solving, encouraging the development of unaccustomed solutions, and this effectively invites one to challenge the foreground contextual presumptions of music teaching and learning (Westerlund, Karlsen & Partti 2020). Similarly, Mateiro and Westvall (2016) argue that "by examining the practices of others, we can learn to challenge and critically consider our own customs and attitudes; this enables an internalization of new perspectives and approaches" (p. 170). The inquiry at hand explores a process wherein music teacher educators from two diverse contexts, Finland and Nepal, engaged in intercultural collaborative educational development work with the aim of learning with and from each other as professionals.

In music education, multiculturalism or interculturalism have most often been motivated by the recognized need to learn each other's music, or to learn about diverse strategies to incorporate and explore traditional methods of learning and teaching music (see e.g. Campbell, 2018; Schippers, 2010). Typically, the multicultural framework is connoted with "teaching about diverse musical traditions" (Sarath, 2017, p. 102), and multicultural learning is thus seen as adding diverse (non-Western-classical) musical and transmission skills to the teachers' "toolboxes". The foundation of this study, however, rests on ideals where the shift towards intercultural music teacher education should be "about the ethics, politics, and ideologies of diversity that condition our understanding of diversity itself" (Westerlund & Karlsen, 2017, p. 100). In the process of this inquiry the music teacher educators' professional intercultural learning is seen as underpinned with continuous questioning of their own attitudes, values, and ethics related to facing diversity in working environments and society at large (Jokikokko, 2005) – the kind that engages the teacher educators in a dynamic process of holistic professional development beyond viewing learning merely in relation to musical traditions or teaching practices. Consequently, this study does not aim to paint a picture of, or compare, 'Nepali' and 'Finnish' music education or music cultures, but rather is primarily interested in looking at the participating teachers' experiences and learning in the intercultural collaborative process. As such, the study follows Dervin's (2016) suggestion to create intercultural practices that respect individuality and avoid categorizations based, for instance, on nationality. Rather, "*interculturality is a point of view, not a given*" (Dervin, 2016, p. 2, italics in original) and is therefore seen as an ongoing deliberate effort toward understanding diversities that should be recognized not as something somewhere else but also within ourselves (Dervin, 2016).

The collaborative construction of this inquiry was inspired by music education literature that suggests that collaborative ways of operating and collaborative learning within and

beyond national borders have the potential to offer a path to constructing a 21st-century music education (see, e.g., Gaunt & Westerlund, 2013; Georgii-Hemming, 2016; Holgersen & Burnard, 2016; Kertz-Welzel, 2018). Similarly, researchers in the field of professional development suggest that an intentional interaction between individual and collaborative activity can be expected to produce new knowledge and learning (Hakkarainen, 2013; Hakkarainen, Paavola & Lipponen, 2004). At its best, nurturing a curious attitude, inquiring collaboratively, and fostering a mindset of constantly seeking new knowledge might have the potential to transform working environments into what Hakkarainen, Paavola, and Lipponen (2004) call innovative knowledge communities. Importantly, the collaborative learning approach is here also seen as one response to constructing the intercultural stance in this inquiry; the kind of stance that reinforces our duty “to discuss [the] different forms of diversities together rather than separately” (Dervin, 2016, p. 28). As a whole, I aim to contribute to the understanding of both the advantages and complications involved in the process that brought music teachers from Finland and Nepal together with the aim of educational development – a process that also held the potential for advancing the professional learning of the music teacher educators involved.

## Research context

The study was initiated after a new national curriculum for Nepal was introduced in 2010 which, for the first time, designated music as a mandatory subject for all. This raised questions about how to organize music teacher education to meet this new need. The Kathmandu-based music school developing the national music curricula in collaboration with the Ministry of Education, Nepal, invited music educators from a Finnish music university to co-develop the preliminary structures and operational systems for their future music teacher education. These collaborative activities of the Nepali and Finnish music educators involved in establishing preliminary structures for music teacher education in 2013–2016 form the context of this inquiry. More precisely, this inquiry arises from a process in which a new music education program for advanced level students was created in this Kathmandu-based music school in Nepal.

Despite the rich and diverse musical life in Nepal, where musical activities permeate “social life and festivities” and are “often expected or mandatory for various occasions” (Treacy, Thapa & Neupane, in press), the emerging formal music education reinforces new aspects to be considered in teaching and learning music. The traditional way of practising music in local communities represents informal education, which can be understood as being “more related to sociocultural re-production rather than social change” (Dasen & Akkari, 2008, p. 10). In contrast to this, the purpose of formal music education can be seen as renewing “the musical culture from which it comes” and “to revitalize its historic

practices” and “to reconstruct musical ways that range from the radical to the reliable” (Allsup & Westerlund, 2012, p. 138). The emerging formal music education in Nepal therefore provided an interesting context for mutual learning for the music educators and researchers<sup>1</sup> participating in the process. This process has required a commitment to critical reflexivity that “opens up our own practices and assumptions as a basis for working toward more critical, responsive, and ethical action” (Cunliffe, 2004, p. 415) far beyond diverse musical skills.

## Methodological frame

The methodology of this qualitative inquiry is participatory action research (PAR). PAR combines features from action research, which “promotes action that has effects on the relations of the people concerned” (McArdle, 2014, p. 76), on the one hand, and participatory research, that “entails people in planning and conducting research” (ibid), on the other. The design of this inquiry follows the “co-learning approach of PAR, where ‘Outsider (s)’ in collaboration with ‘Insider (s)’ contributes to a knowledge base that potentially leads into improved/critiqued practice” (Herr & Anderson, 2005, p. 31). In this mode of PAR, “the external facilitators (e.g. university educators) are the outside action researchers, their partners in participative enquiry [...] are inside co-researchers” (Stern, 2014, p. 204). In this inquiry, the choice of PAR was an important ethical grounding for both the research and the practical-level activities in Kathmandu. The aim has been to work “‘with,’ not ‘on’ or ‘for’ people” (McArdle, 2014, p. 75), and to regard the local research participants as “co-researchers rather than objects of research” (Stern, 2014, p. 203). This, however, is a “demanding ethical position” (Bennett & Roberts, 2004, p. 11) and reinforces the researcher’s commitment to performing reflexivity, recognizing bias, and consistently advancing his or her of communication skills. PAR places value on democratic validity highlighting the meaningfulness of the process in the local setting and the manifestations of the collaboration (Herr & Anderson, 2005; Stern, 2014). However, the democratic validity is complicated by potentially contrasting views, and by heterogeneity among the local participants as well as the external researcher’s interests that might knowingly or unknowingly guide the directions the process takes (see Minkler et al., 2002). In all, PAR is the kind of research that is based on the different kinds of interaction among the research participants within an extensive timeline, instead of offering neat ‘data collection’ procedures.

1 The collaboration commenced in 2013 as The Music Teacher Education Development Project in Nepal 2013–2015, funded by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Finland. In 2015 the collaboration continued as one part of a larger research project “Global visions through mobilizing networks: Co-developing intercultural music teacher education in Finland, Israel, and Nepal”, funded by the Academy of Finland in 2015–2020. The Global Visions sub-project reported here targets in scrutinizing potentials and constraints of intercultural collaborative educational development for music educators’ professional development, music teacher education practices and how these could inform further the music education scholarship.

## Research participants

During the period of this study, I visited Kathmandu, Nepal ten times for a total of 33 weeks to work closely with the teachers and administrators of the Kathmandu-based music school. The most intensive educational development work in Kathmandu took place in a teacher group consisting of myself and four musician-teachers-teacher educators at the music school in Kathmandu. This group is referred to as the ‘core team’ in this inquiry. We are all approximately the same age (30–40). As music educators, our educational backgrounds reflect the opportunities available in our contexts. I have a university degree in music, whereas the Nepali co-researchers have acquired their teaching competence through practice, like most of their colleagues in the country (see Treacy, 2020). Having had educational opportunities not available in Nepal, I was required to recognize my “superordinate vantage point” (Sanger, 1996, p. 153) and scrutinize the various forms of privilege and power available to me (see Wallerstein, 1999). Indeed, in spite of my best intentions to create a democratic and egalitarian environment, my positionality as an external researcher working in the context of higher music education should be taken as a backdrop that inescapably frames the collaborative work in this inquiry.

## Theoretical lenses and research questions

In this article, I will explore the Nepali-Finnish teachers’ collaboration through the theoretical concept of a professional learning community (PLC). In the literature, PLC has been used to illustrate teachers’ collaborative, reflective and learning-oriented efforts to improve their practices (see, e.g., Stoll & Seashore Louis, 2007). The PLC is understood particularly as a form of professional development that goes beyond enhancing technical skills. Instead, in PLCs, the aim is to work towards a “deep and broad learning” (Stoll & Seashore Louis, 2007, p. 192). Therefore, the PLC resonated soundly with the aims of the Nepali-Finnish collaboration being discussed here, where the aim was to engage the participating music educators in holistic professional development beyond viewing learning merely in relation to musical traditions or teaching practices. In recent years, PLC has also been used as a theoretical tool to explore music teachers’ professional learning (see Sindberg, 2013; Kastner, 2014; Battersby & Verdi, 2014; Pellegrino et al. 2017). This inquiry contributes to the existing literature through its particular interest in the nature of learning that was accumulated in the Finnish-Nepali intercultural music educator that aimed towards working in ways that are indicated at the PLC theories. Moreover, as Brunton (2016) points out, research on PLCs in intercultural contexts is scarce. Therefore, this inquiry makes a contribution to the existing literature, with interculturality seen here in the particular frame of this project involving Nepali and Finnish music educators.

As is recognized by many researchers (see, e.g., Blacklock, 2009; Morrissey, 2000; Leo & Cowan, 2000) there are certain characteristics and components that are hallmarks of the functioning of a PLC. Those employed in this study have been suggested by Roy and Hord (2006, p. 492) and Nkengbeza (2014, p. 36) and are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1:** Characteristics/Components indicating PLC

Roy & Hord (2006): Characteristics of a PLC	Nkengbeza (2014): Components in constructing a PLC
Supportive and shared leadership; collective learning and its application; shared values and vision; supportive conditions; shared practice	Genuine collaboration among the stakeholders; developing trust; finding recognized purpose and focused vision; accountability; genuine relationships; genuine communication; continuous inquiry

All these characteristics/components can be seen as acting either as catalysts or challenges in the process of developing a PLC. Thus, the PLC characteristics/components are harnessed here as an aid to the understanding of both the constraints and the potential catalysts for collaborative professional learning among educators from two diverse contexts.

Based on these premises, the research questions that guide this article are:

1. How did the characteristics and components of PLCs (see Table 1) act as catalysts or challenges in constructing a collaborative learning environment for the Finnish-Nepali music educator group?
2. What kind of learning was experienced by the participants of the intercultural professional learning community?

## Empirical material and analysis

All of the empirical material was generated from 2013 to 2016. The main empirical material that was used to answer the research questions guiding this article consists of 1) eight reflective essays that the core team of Nepali co-researchers wrote in August 2016; 2) my researcher diary written from 2013 to 2016 (140 pages in total); 3) 17 transcriptions of semi-structured interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009) with the teachers and administrators of the music school, each lasting about 30–40 minutes; 4) ten recorded meetings of the core group transcribed in part, each lasting about three hours; and 5) 22 video-recorded workshops that I conducted for the music school teachers between 25.11.2013 and 18.8.2015, each lasting about two hours. Due to the holistic nature of PAR, however, it is challenging to describe the totality of the empirical material; instead, as pointed out by Herr and Anderson (2005), one just has to accept portions of it in the presentation. Indeed, in addition to the main empirical material, several formal and informal discussions between myself and the music school faculty members, as well as class observations,



have influenced the overall process. Informed consent for research participation was gathered in advance from participants, and they were given details of the voluntary, confidential, and anonymous nature of participation. It has been possible for the Nepali music school educators to attend activities, such as workshops and discussions, without being part of this research.

The analysis of the empirical material has been a task for me as a researcher. To answer the first research question, Jackson and Mazzei's (2012) idea of *Thinking with Theory* and Tuomi and Sarajärvi's (2018) theory-driven content analysis were used to analyse the empirical material through the lens of the PLC. The PLC characteristics and components (see Table 1) were used as guideposts for understanding and unpacking the efforts to facilitate a collaborative professional learning environment for the Finnish-Nepali music educators. The empirical material used for answering the second research question consisted of the eight reflective essays that the Nepali co-researchers wrote in January 2016, my researcher diary and the ten recorded and partly transcribed meetings of the core group. This particular empirical material was analysed by using thematic content analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), where the "particular analytic interest" (p. 79) was in how the participants articulated their learning in their written reflections and group discussions.

After I made the analysis, the findings were brought back to the core team co-researchers. This article has thus been reviewed and discussed in the core team prior to submission. Although the writing of this article was my task (see Herr & Anderson, 2005; Eilks, 2014), the collective validation addresses issues of democratic validity (Herr & Anderson, 2005), where collaborative verification is seen as "an ethical and social justice issue" (p. 56). The results of this research have thus followed the guidelines of PAR, in which the participants "review and validate the results" and "retain ownership" (Stern, 2014, p. 203). As Moser (1980) argued decades ago, validity in PAR is a matter of "dialogical argumentation, with the 'truth' being a matter of consensus rather than of verification by any externally determined standards" (quoted in Rahman, 2008, p. 50). Also, catalytic validity, which puts emphasis on the learning of the researcher and the research participants (Herr & Anderson, 2005), has been a central element in this PAR. Catalytic validity in this inquiry is illustrated through answering the second research question.

It should be noted, however, that evaluations of PAR look beyond the narrow product of research outcomes and that they place substantial weight on the process as a whole (Bennett & Roberts, 2004). Moreover, as PAR explicitly targets the sharing of experiences from a particular site, and trusts the academia and practitioners to "make their own wise judgements about what parts of [the] story might be relevant to their situation" (Kemmis, McTaggart & Nixon, 2014, p. 68), a thorough articulation of the process is needed. This will be provided in what follows, as I describe the findings of this inquiry. The following section contributes to an answer to the first research question.

## Beginning the collaboration

When the Finnish-Nepali partnership was established in 2013, we were relatively unfamiliar with each other's educational contexts, and the collaborative ways of working were open to negotiation. The preliminary phase of the Nepali-Finnish collaboration took place under the The Music Teacher Education Development Project in Nepal,<sup>2</sup> which lasted until December 2014. During this time, I visited Kathmandu four times for a total of over 70 days, with my first visit taking place in November 2013. During these early stages, the activities in the music school mainly consisted of workshops for teachers and staff, which had been a particular request from the music school management. The 16 workshops, that each lasted about two hours, were designed and conducted by myself and other visiting Finnish teachers and researchers. Outside the workshops, discussions and interactions with the Nepali teachers and administrators mostly took place in official meetings and formal settings.

By my fifth visit to Kathmandu in March-April 2015, it had become obvious that the motivation of the music school teachers to participate in the workshops was disappearing. During my first visit, for example, the number of teachers participating in the workshops had been approximately twenty, and included most of the teaching faculty at the music school, but by my fifth visit, only a few were showing up.<sup>3</sup> It appeared that the aims of the workshops at that time were not particularly clear to the teachers and this created a lack of motivation. In addition, I was leading the workshops in similar ways and with similar contents to those I led in teacher training in Finland. Confronted with the decreasing number of participants, I started to wonder if perhaps the workshop contents were not relevant in the local context. I did not know how to proceed and was confused about the overall goals of the Nepali-Finnish collaboration. During the next workshop, I received confirmation of my doubts:

When teaching at my home university, I use a particular model for lesson planning. I wanted to bring this model to my Nepali colleagues. I spent a two-hour workshop lecturing about this model and then gave the workshop participants a task: to write a plan for their next lesson. However, at that point, one of the teachers said: "But we cannot plan like this. We do not know beforehand who is coming to the class and what is then required." It was only then that I realized that classes in this institution are actually not one-on-one teaching, but group lessons of 3–5 students who would sign up one week at a time. Boy, did I feel stupid. I had just assumed all music schools operate in the same ways as in Finland! (Researcher diary, 3.4. 2015)

2 Funded by the Finnish Ministry of Foreign Affairs

3 During 25–30 November 2013, the number of teachers participating in the five workshops was between 17–21. On 2nd April 2015, only three teachers participated in the workshop.



I had been blinded by my educational background and had not seen the differences in educational practices between our two countries, or realized the significance of these differences. The teaching at the institution was influenced by the Guru Shishya Paramparā model, common in Nepali contexts. In this model, it is typical to have “students at varying stages of learning in one class” (Vasanth 2013, p. 20), and the students then participate in music making according to their abilities. In other words, the tuition is strongly teacher-led, whereas the teaching in the context of my own country emphasises student-centered ways of designing the classes. I was also struggling in my attempts to facilitate an environment where the participants could engage in reflective discussions after activities in the workshops. Again, this is a common practice at my home university. However, my way of facilitating this process – by not providing concrete answers but instead asking questions to elicit ideas from the participants – was an unfamiliar practice in this context and created a lot of confusion, which manifested in an unwillingness to participate in discussions. It was becoming clear that working in the same way as I did at home was not making any headway, but seemed, instead, to be leading us towards a dead end.

## **Identifying challenges and opportunities**

To better understand the context and practices in this particular music school, I interviewed, during my visit in March and April 2015, 13 staff members and teachers and spent time observing classes ( $n = 12$ ). The goal was to increase my own understanding of the local context, and in this way become better at facilitating collaborative ways of working and co-developing practices and future visions. The interviews and observations provided me with a better overview of everyday life at the music school. They also illuminated some challenges when it came to supporting systematic and progressive approaches of education, such as: i) the lack of a shared vision and common educational aims, and ii) practical circumstances (e.g., a lack of instruments). At this point, the teachers participating in the workshops and volunteering for interviews were those who taught mainly rock music and who made up about one-third of the entire teaching faculty ( $n = 8$ ) at the music school. Their view was that one of the biggest challenges was that the lessons took place in heterogeneous groups, in which the number and level of students would vary from week to week. Moreover, some of them followed a particular trademarked European exam syllabus, where the lessons are designed progressively, and the teachers felt this fitted poorly with the way that classes were organized in their music school. However, the interviews, while revealing these challenges, also highlighted one possible way forward: Both the administrators and the teachers felt that a more structured local curriculum and an officially recognized student certificate were needed at the institution. As one of the teachers explained:

So far in the context of Nepal, we need a certification for what we study here. That is the most important thing, for the parents and the students too. (Interview, Teacher 3, 29.3.2015)

An institutional curriculum was also seen as a route to a more established way of teaching that would guarantee equal quality for all the students.

But as an institution, [...] when a student finishes one year [at the music school], what do they achieve? So that's the main concern now. A student, after one year studying with [teacher], might have different skills than one studying, with, for example, flute [with another teacher]. Their skill level doesn't match. So that is one of the concerns, that there should be [...] a structured curriculum. [...] If the students spend one year at [the music school], their level of expertise has to be the same. (Interview, Teacher 4, 7.4.2015)

Both the teachers and the administrators felt that a local curriculum could offer a possible starting point for the further development of music education, as it would help teachers plan their work in a better way:

Researcher: Why have you decided to start the [music school] internal [local] curriculum work?

Administrator 1: We wanted to bring structure and to formulate everything. That will help us implement a proper way of education and to teach music in a formal way. (Interview, 26.3.2015)

The teachers and administrators also, as has been noted, highlighted the need for an official certificate for the students. In their opinion, the certificate would help parents value music education and allow their children to pursue music studies. One administrator also pondered whether an official certificate could help the students continue their music studies abroad or gain more job opportunities in Nepal. Therefore, it appeared that a shared goal of the music school stakeholders was to establish a new educational program, in which tuition would be organized progressively, and for which the students would commit to the studies for a longer period of time. The students would, on completing the program, receive a certificate.

## **Building a shared platform for collaborative learning**

The collaborative work towards the goal of designing a new educational program and its curriculum began in August 2015. This work engaged the eight teachers, who had been involved in the interviews earlier and taught mainly rock music, in intense discussions aimed

at defining an educational vision for a new program that would be targeted at advanced level students. The process of finding a guiding vision for the new program was inspired by several researchers in the field of teacher education (e.g., Hammerness, 2001; Hammerness, van Tartwijk & Snoek, 2012; Leo & Cowan, 2000) who have argued that a clearly articulated and shared vision is needed in order to create a strong educational program. Creating a vision calls for identifying shared beliefs about the institutional aims, values, practices, and behavior best suited to realising it (see, Kruse & Lillie, 2000). In order to identify these features, we came together for collaborative workshops. During four workshops (each lasting from two to four hours) in August 2015 that involved brainstorming and collective ‘think-tank’ discussions, the participating teachers (n = 6–8) and myself co-created an overall vision for the music school that all the participating teachers could commit to:

[Music School] produces creative musicians who are able to perform in a professional manner in the field of music and are able to continue their studies in higher music education.

To implement this co-created vision, the seven music school teachers and myself started to design a curriculum for the three-year program, and agreed that the program should also include some courses in teaching. By introducing teaching as one possible career path for the students, we were also hoping to be able to contribute to meeting the future need for educated music teachers in Nepal. The work started by developing yearly overall learning outcomes that mirrored the program vision. At this point, the music school teachers took an active lead in planning and conducting the meetings and workshops, and I stepped into the background from the leading facilitator’s role. In the workshops, we used various collaborative ways of working: such as collecting ideas for post-it notes, and discussing certain topics in pairs, smaller groups and instrument groups, before sharing the ideas created in these smaller groups with everyone. The most intense discussions during these workshops arose around topics such as processes of evaluation, student creativity, and the role of traditional musics in the program. Traditional music in Nepal is mainly performed inside communities with relatively restricted access to outsiders, meaning not only foreigners but also members of different castes and ethnic groups from within Nepal (Moisala, 2013). The participating teachers were, however, concerned about the future of traditional musics in Nepal and wanted to include traditional material in the curriculum using creative approaches. These included, for instance, using traditional material as a source for new compositions and improvisation, an approach familiar to me from the Finnish folk music education at my home university. Supporting student creativity also became central in other ways as well. All the participating teachers at the workshops are well-established professional musicians and referred to the importance of being able to offer creative input in diverse musical settings. However, vivid discussions arose around the topic of how creativity could be measured and whether formal music education requires measurable

factors – without the participating teachers reaching consensus. Similarly, the use of grading in assessment was another “hot topic” in the discussions. Some of the teachers argued that using grades would give the program more “official” weight too, which would increase the value of this kind of education in students’ and parents’ eyes. Other teachers countered this view by asking: What does a grade tell about individual musicians’ various abilities and areas of development? In the end, it was decided that the student evaluations would emphasize formative assessment methods but would also include final grades for the courses. Such discussions relating to assessment can be seen as deriving from the forms of evaluation typical in Nepali basic education, where standardized external exams place notable emphasis on measurable factors and exclude the individual students’ “intellectual level, interest, pace, and needs” (Government of Nepal, 2007, p. 27; see, also, Treacy et al., 2019). Finding the most desirable ways of addressing these issues in the new program called for a discussion of the unique features of music education, its purpose and educational dimensions. Importantly and delightfully, the workshop discussions at this time had become rich conversations characterized by increasing openness. This was likely due to the group size being smaller with only approximately seven teachers, instead of the twenty in the beginning of the collaboration, and to having a concrete goal – developing a new educational programme – to aim for.

After determining the overall vision and aims for the new programme, we then continued further in the curriculum development work during that same visit in August 2015. We, the seven teachers and myself, familiarized ourselves with different curriculum guidelines and theoretical aspects of curriculum building (e.g., Elliott, 1995) and then immersed ourselves in intensive discussions of how these might or might not be suitable in the context of Nepal. I then worked one-on-one with each of the seven teachers for approximately one hour each. In one-on-one sessions we formulated semester-based instrument-specific curricula for guitar, bass, drums, vocals, and music theory. Each teacher used his own reasoning and experience in adjusting their instrument or subject specific curricula. During this visit, I also started to play music together with three of the music school teachers who had been active participants in the curriculum work. We played two concerts together, and between the time rehearsing and performing, we started to spend a lot more time together outside the meetings at the school. Finding common ground in our musical landscapes and spending more and more time with music, both playing together and informally attending musical events, allowed us to get to know each other better and further develop our collegiality.

The challenge at this time became how to allocate enough time for the program development work. Due to the geographical distance between Finland and Nepal, this work mostly happened in intensive periods when I was in Kathmandu, and it was not included in the Nepali teachers’ paid working hours at the music school. The time teachers invested in this process involved their being away from their other jobs, and affected their monthly

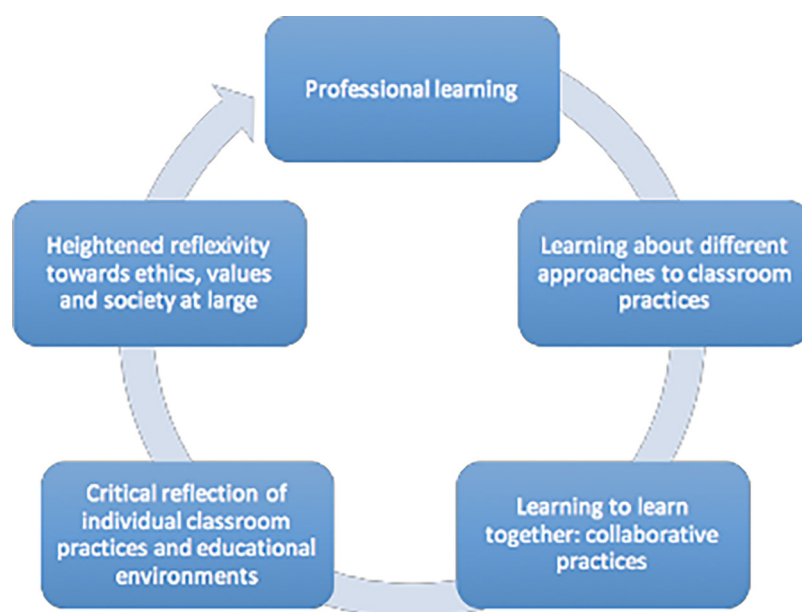
income. Thus, at the end of the productive working period in August 2015, it was evident that in order for the process to continue, new means were again needed. These means were found by opening up the possibility for four Nepali teachers who had been active leaders in developing the new program to complete their Teacher's Pedagogical Studies (60 ECTS), the teacher qualification required in Finland as stipulated in Decree No. 986/1998. These four teachers and myself form the core team of this inquiry. The core team Nepali teachers began their studies in December 2015, and, from this point on, my work in Kathmandu took place mostly among the core team. The studies were tailor-made for the core team and were taught primarily in Kathmandu during the Finnish researchers' visits, and partly online. Although the studies followed the course structure defined by the Finnish Ministry of Education, the contents intertwined seamlessly with the activities of establishing the new study program. The motivation to participate in the studies was enhanced by an opportunity which is currently not available in Nepal: to earn an official, internationally recognized certification as music teachers. My role in the core team varied from mentor to co-learner, co-writer, and sometimes co-teacher together with my Finnish colleagues. Importantly, we, the core team, studied collaboratively in order to complete the designated courses that constituted the Teacher's Pedagogical Studies. This included familiarizing oneself with music education practices around the world, reading music education literature, and then jointly discussing and reflecting on them in relation to our own working environments. Written reflections were made both individually and collaboratively using online platforms such as Google Drive. Course assignments included writing lesson plans and curricula, practice teaching, reading, group discussions on the ethics of education, group presentations, pedagogical portfolios, and even presenting individually and collaboratively at international conferences, such as the Cultural Diversity In Music Education conference (2015) and the International Society of Music Education World Conference (2016). The Teacher's Pedagogical Studies thus succeeded in providing us with more time to work together as colleagues and discuss music education matters, thereby enabling us to develop our thinking as a team.

In January 2016, the new co-created program started at the music school with nine students entering it. The activities relating to the final establishment of this new study program were carried out as part of the Teachers' Pedagogical Studies, in collaboration with the Finnish and Nepali educators. In 2016 we proceeded with the Teachers' Pedagogical Studies in March, April, and August. These studies were combined with activities in the new study programme. Thus, the reading of music education literature and conducting of tasks for the Teachers' Pedagogical Studies were applied in practical level activities in the new program. The core team formed the teaching faculty in the new program and we also taught in the new program collaboratively.

In August 2016, we reflected on our collaborative process in creating the new music education program. The Nepali co-researchers' written reflections as well as my researcher diary were then used to illustrate our learning throughout this process.

## Professional learning in the intercultural PLC

In this section, I will answer the second research question and illustrate how the participating Nepali and Finnish teachers articulated their learning in the process of constructing the new study program. As said earlier, whereas intercultural professional learning in music education would typically be about learning each other's music and music-making practices (see Campbell, 2018; Schippers, 2010), in this intercultural process of developing a new educational programme, learning about musical styles or diverse classroom practices was only a starting point. The interpretation of the learning process of the participants can be depicted as a cycle: Learning about diverse classroom practices through observation and discussions allowed us to learn from collaborative practices, which motivated critical reflection on our educational environments, and this in turn enhanced reflexivity towards ethics and values on a wider societal level and paved a path towards “professional learning” – in the deepest meaning of the phrase.



**Figure 1:** Cycle of professional learning in the intercultural PLC

### Learning about different approaches to classroom practices

Reflecting on one's teaching practices and critically mirroring them to ideas, not just from close colleagues but also from colleagues from a different educational culture, opened the door to exploring new pedagogical approaches for all of us. Familiarizing myself with the teaching practices in Nepal widened the horizon of what “good music education practices” could look like:

I followed a class where Eastern classical music was taught. The processes were strongly teacher-led, something that in my pedagogical training, and during my career, I had



tried to avoid. Yet, I could see how perfect the approach was to this particular style, and how the students also enjoyed the very practical exercises that led them into the secrets of ragas in small and repetitive steps. (Researcher's diary, 30.3. 2015)

Since then, I have not been too afraid of sometimes choosing strongly teacher-led approaches in my teaching. Similarly, the Nepali co-researchers adopted pedagogical approaches in their teaching that I had been using while leading workshops for the students and teachers in the Kathmandu-based music school. These included, for instance, the use of body percussion and collaborative composition methods, where features (melodic or rhythmic) of traditional music act as a catalyst for creating new music. In our discussions, we all acknowledged that one of the benefits of our collaboration was being inspired by different teaching approaches, which widened the scope of methods available to us when constructing learning paths for our students.

### **Learning to learn together: Collaborative practices**

Collaborative practices were a somewhat new experience for the Nepali teachers. The Nepali members of the core team described how challenging it had been at first to get used to sharing their personal practice:

Writing, reading, and sharing knowledge with colleagues is new to me. [However] this process helps me compare, rethink, and analyse the ways that I work. (Reflective essay, Teacher 2, August 2016)

One of the core team members described how he had been brought up to be afraid of making mistakes, both in school and at home. Therefore, he had not wanted either to ask for help or to share any struggles he might have had in his teaching. Another teacher described how, in Nepal, sharing one's good practices is also uncommon, since so many people are trying to get a job just to survive, making competition a hard fact of life.

Our intensive work periods when I was in Nepal enhanced our core team's sense of working not only in a group but also *as* a group. Learning to work collaboratively made the process more meaningful and rewarding:

Working in a team with the teachers has been fun, and we are able to learn a lot from everyone. Sharing and communicating has made me learn in many different ways. Learning different approaches to teaching and sharing ideas with others has been helpful. Achieving the set goal with the collaboration and with the team has been rewarding and is building a sense of collective achievement and progress. (Reflective essay, Teacher 2, August 2016)

Importantly, it could be seen that the team's collaborative practices had an impact on the core team members' professional self-confidence and manifested as palpable enthusiasm:

In the same way as when working with the other teachers, I could notice some kind of empowerment happening [in teacher 2] during the work. Even though at the beginning of the work the teachers had been insecure. When they get to work and notice that they have a lot of professional knowledge to do the work, they get very excited and are full of ideas. (Researcher's diary, 4.8. 2015)

The increase in professional self-confidence, exemplified here by trust in one's own abilities, was then enacted through the ability to critically examine classroom practices and educational environments.

### **Critical reflection of classroom practices and educational environments**

All of us core team members recognized various ways the collaborative process helped us to become more aware of different dimensions of music teaching and learning.

In my view, the most important aspect of this process is self-reflecting and evaluating our own work. As a result, it has provided us with an equal opportunity to assess our performance [as teachers], making it more organized and efficient. (Reflective essay, Teacher 3, August 2016)

Another teacher recognized the importance of self-evaluation, making a connection to how it could act as a springboard to improving one's professional environment.

It is really important to evaluate our own behaviour and carry out activities that help us to put our learning to practice. In this way, we can encourage and get engaged in the professional development of a team and an institution. (Reflective essay, Teacher 3, August 2016)

Importantly, becoming more aware of the educational practices and environment, and the aims and values embedded in them, paved the way for heightened critical reflexivity.

### **Heightened reflexivity towards ethics, values, and society at large**

Reflecting on our classroom practices and co-developing the new program soon expanded our discussions from music education practices to society more broadly:

As a result of this three-year-long process, I already see a community of people within this program, with balanced, harmonious, positive, and yet critical thinking; soulful yet rational thinking is building. This kind of balanced society is what we long for. From this I sense a need for a social change. We always expect the government to bring a positive change in society, whereas it is the society that needs to make the positive change itself. (Reflective essay, Teacher 1, August 2016)

Thus, by collaboratively learning diverse approaches to music education, questions about equality and equity in relation to diversity, democracy, and societal change arose in our discussions. This was also articulated in one of the reflective essays:

From this process, I've found confidence in my belief that there is more to music education than teaching only the music. It is more like building a community of people that actually takes into consideration what kind of background the students are coming from. (Reflective essay, Teacher 1, August 2016)

For me, one of the most painful points of learning was when I began to become more aware of my own positionality concerning power and privilege. As a western woman, a scholar, and a university lecturer, I have opportunities and possibilities that are available to very few in the world. In my diaries, the emotional struggle is present throughout. I asked myself, for example, how I could overcome the discomfort caused by witnessing injustices and inequalities, while having so many privileges I had done nothing to “deserve”. Moreover, a larger question loomed behind the whole work: Is it possible to impact these fundamental issues of global and local inequalities through music and music education?

## Discussion

In what follows, I will offer a discussion of how the PLC characteristics acted as catalysts or constraints in constructing a collaborative professional learning environment in the Nepali-Finnish collaboration and will further discuss the nature of the learning process experienced by the participating music educators. Interculturality frames the process of this inquiry throughout as a point of view (Dervin, 2016) which establishes a perspective that recognizes the particular underlying conditions for this intercultural PLC, as well as for the professional learning that took place.

### **An ongoing negotiation of principles, and the purpose of the collaboration**

Needless to say, the emergence of a PLC with participants from two different countries and contexts was a long and complex process, with no guarantee that a PLC would manifest or be sustained. Indeed, the beginning of the process lacked more or less all the features of a PLC (see Table 1), which highlighted how the lack of these features almost led the collaboration towards a dead end. The features of a PLC only started to emerge as catalysts after the teacher group became smaller, and the features then intensified further in the core team work. Throughout the process, aiming towards a collaborative, reflective, and learning-oriented way of working together (Stoll & Seashore Luis, 2007) required both a constant re-evaluation of the direction we wanted to take and finding new means to move forward.

Leo and Cowan (2000) note “that creating a professional learning community requires change facilitators ‘to get down in the trenches’ with teachers and to struggle with them in whatever they are trying to do differently” (p. 15). Therefore, there needed to be enough time to enable the external researcher to participate fully in the activities. Thus, a significant supportive condition (Roy & Hord, 2006) for the whole process and collaboration was the project funding received from Finland. It provided means for reciprocal travel and allocated working time not only for myself, but also for the Finnish educators, who were responsible for teaching the Teachers Pedagogical Studies. Genuine communication was dependent on our spending sufficient time together (Nkengbeza, 2014), as our communication was slowed down and complicated because none of us was using our mother tongue, we were all accustomed to different communication styles, and, throughout the process, we had to navigate power issues and tacit assumptions about how to work. Learning to read the underlying meanings of the expressions and the connotations that we incorporated into our verbal communication was essential for the process of PLC and required time.

### **A critical reflection on the educational environments and the ongoing negotiations and constant re-evaluations of values and ethics**

In designing a new educational program stemming strongly from the local surroundings and inspired by both international music education research and practices from various places we, as the core team, needed to reach beyond our familiar practices. This process raised questions for all of us, such as: Why have I been teaching the way I have? What kind of tacit knowledge have I accumulated in my surroundings? Understanding on a very emotional and deep level Mateiro and Westvall’s (2016) notion that “when we teach music, we tend to approach and understand this task through the lens of values and beliefs that we are accustomed to” (p. 157) was a transforming experience for many of us, for it really did lead to a fuller understanding of ourselves and our histories. Indeed, the intercultural environment required us to develop the ability to critically reflect on the foreground contextual presumptions of music teaching and learning (Westerlund, Karlsen & Partti, 2020) both individually and as a group. Such critical reflection manifested, for instance, in our discussions about assessment, evaluation, and creativity. Our discussion of the effects of selected approaches to student learning and assessment invited the core team to look deeper into the contextual practices and how they reflect the wider societal context. This critical reflexivity led us to ask questions concerning accountability (Nkengbeza, 2014), such as: As music educators, who are we accountable for? What kind of educational values guide our work? How do these values affect accountability? Our experience thus suggests that intercultural collaborative learning has the potential to trigger constant questioning related to one’s values and the ethics of music teaching. Therefore, if the turn towards intercultural music education should be more aware of the “ethics, politics, and ideologies” (Westerlund & Karlsen, 2017, p. 100) guiding our professional practice, providing music educators with

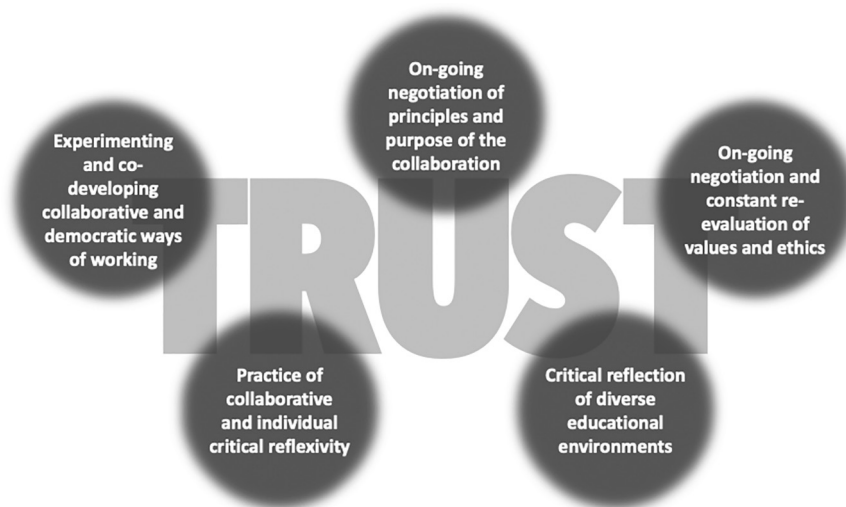
opportunities for collaborative learning in intercultural settings may be an asset. Further research on collaborative learning in intercultural settings could perhaps hold potential for responding to inequalities using music education as a “tool”, where social change becomes part of the structural process of organising music education.

### **Experimenting and co-developing collaborative and democratic ways of working, and the practice of collaborative and individual critical reflexivity**

Intercultural collaborative learning can be examined in relation to how Hakkarainen, Paavola, and Lipponen (2004) theorize learning: Intellectual efforts require skills in operating in social networks and taking collaborative responsibility in tackling forthcoming challenges. When the Nepali music school teachers took an active lead in designing the workshops aimed at developing the new program, the collaboration took a turn towards supportive and shared leadership (Roy & Hord, 2006). These more democratic ways of distributing the leadership role were the beginning of what, according to Nkengbeza (2014), is a more genuine collaboration among the stakeholders. Moving towards collective learning and its application (Roy & Hord, 2006) required another significant supportive condition (Roy & Hord, 2006): the opportunity to take part in Teachers Pedagogical Studies. These studies supported us in engaging collective learning and its application (Roy & Hord, 2006), and building a habit of continuous inquiry (Nkengbeza, 2014). Moreover, the collaborative learning environment eased and supported the core team members’ processes of learning, as illustrated in the selected quotations from the empirical material above. However, the critical approach seems to invite the charge that the environment of the Pedagogical Studies might be controversial in terms of equality (see Sanger, 1996). The studies followed a Finnish curriculum and I also acted as a co-teacher along with the other Finnish educators, which inevitably placed me hierarchically in a different position in the core team compared to the Nepali participants. However, collaborative ways of working supported the steering of the collaborative work, and, at the same time, the development of shared personal practice (Roy & Hord, 2006). A common goal of developing a new program provided a recognized purpose and focused vision (Nkengbeza, 2014) for our work. The joint task of writing the program curriculum required us to engage in ongoing negotiation and evaluation of our jointly shared visions and values (Roy & Hord, 2006). However, individual and collaborative critical reflexivity required not only the ability to question our practices, but also the bravery to share our struggles. As individuals, this challenged us on both personal and professional levels. Notably, the core team’s Nepali participants’ reflective essays and my researcher diary recognized our collaborative practices as the catalyst for learning, although getting used to these practices was neither straightforward nor easy. The collaborative practices required, most importantly, the development of trust (see Nkengbeza 2014), which I recognize as the most central ingredient in the emergence of the intercultural PLC and the main impetus for our professional learning.

### Trust: Balancing between confidence, uncertainty, and vulnerability

In constructing this PLC, trust needed to be developed on many levels – trust in oneself to participate, and trust in the other participants (Sachs, 1994). Discussing the diversities in our teaching and learning environments, educational histories, and all of our shifting positionalities (teacher-learner-insider-outsider) throughout the process, and the diversity in our points of learning – in other words, the diversities in ourselves (Dervin, 2016) – would not have been possible without the emerging trust in the core team. A trusting environment supported us in facing uncertainty and vulnerability and eased the emotional turbulence of questioning our familiar classroom practices, educational histories, and very personal issues. In this intercultural PLC, where several kinds of power imbalances (e.g., inequalities in financial and educational opportunities) complicated the relationships, working through our commonalities built the foundation for togetherness. Our experience thus echoes Dervin (2016), who suggests that “starting critically and reflexively from similarities rather than differences might open up new vistas for both research and practice” (p. 37) and might therefore be an asset in intercultural work. The core team members shared a similar passion for teaching and playing music and had a lot in common professionally. Making music together and spending more time together outside official meetings supported the trust-building and developed what Nkengbeza (2014) calls genuine relationships, which cannot be achieved without overarching trust. The emergence of different forms of trust was what drove the components of this intercultural PLC into acting as catalysts. Moreover, without trust, the professional learning of the participants would have remained on a surface level. Trust, however, needed to be constantly developed. All in all, mutual trust can justifiably be seen as an emerging factor in this field of interaction and collaboration. Trust sometimes seemed to be growing stronger, at other times to be weakening, but as a background factor behind all the other essential components of an intercultural PLC, as presented in Figure 2, it plays an absolutely central role.



**Figure 2:** The components of an intercultural PLC in education



## Concluding thoughts

In this article, I have discussed the complex and multifaceted process of facilitating the professional development of music teacher educators through participating in intercultural collaboration. Considering how this work can contribute to the wider music education community, I suggest that looking at the intercultural professional learning community in this study as an innovative knowledge-building community (Hakkarainen, Paavola & Lipponen, 2004) might offer some direction to the efforts of music teacher education institutions to respond to the needs of ever-changing and diversifying societies, and provide ideas about the ways that life in [music] teacher education institutions could be organized in the future. If engagement in the process of dynamic and holistic continuous professional learning demands that teachers go through rather stressful socio-emotional processes, then space and time ought to be allocated for managing this within the educational institutions. If professional learning is seen as a gradually growing individual resource closely related to one's identity and the creation of new identities (Hakkarainen, Paavola & Lipponen, 2004), should institutions and governments commit to allocating time and financial support for teachers' professional learning, for example in intercultural environments? This inquiry highlights the importance of supporting systematic collaborative models inside and between institutions, and even beyond national borders, as they hold potential for constructing reflective, ethically engaged and diversity-aware music education – the kind of education that is needed in these rapidly changing times. If the music teachers in a global society have to facilitate “expanding perspectives” (Mateiro & Westvall 2016, p. 170), this inquiry suggests that collaborative learning might be one of the more successful ways of achieving this. Consequently, I suggest that collaborative professional learning should be embedded in the institutional structures, such as curricula and funding frames, within music education. Indeed, this might hold potential for transforming music teacher education institutions into globally aware innovative sites that engage their teachers in continuous professional learning in collaboration with one another.

## Author biography

DMus **Vilma Timonen**, is a Lecturer in Folk Music at the Sibelius Academy, University of the Arts Helsinki. Her extensive career as a folk music educator and musician comprehends working in various fields of teacher education as well as being one of the pioneers bringing traditional Finnish folk instrument Kantele into new musical environments. As a researcher, her work focuses on intercultural collaborations through which, educational development in both, institutional and personal level are under scrutiny. Timonen aims to

contribute to more globally aware music teacher education, where diversity is embraced through fostering and elevating local musical traditions.

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